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**Managing Vietnamese newsrooms: the role of internal  
communication**

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**MANAGING  
VIETNAMESE NEWSROOMS:  
THE ROLE OF  
INTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of Westminster  
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## **THESIS ABSTRACT**

There have been many studies on news production but little has been found about newsroom efficiency despite the fact that this is journalists' main concern.

The very few (mostly foreign) researchers who study Vietnamese media usually look at them from policy making and political-social perspectives, and with an outsider's eye. They have little physical access, if any, to the media houses, which surely limits their view. Their approach implicitly over-emphasizes the influence of political forces and neglects the media's own dynamics. This research takes a different approach: from insiders' point of view.

Using two daily newspapers as case studies, this multi-disciplinary ethnographic research seeks to understand the strategies Vietnamese news media employ to cope with the subsidy cuts and increasing competition while still under close political control. A particular focus is on the newsroom operational strategies to improve efficiency.

It is found that organizational structure and culture, work climate, motivation and employee satisfaction, leadership and management styles, personnel policies (task requirements vs personal abilities and skills), systems/policies and procedures, and most importantly, communication are the factors that affect the newsroom efficiency, as well as newsroom strategy implementation and results.

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I also thank my supervisors and other professors, lecturers and staffs from CAMRI and the Research Office who were very supportive and patient with me.

I am grateful to Le Xuan Trung, Doan Cong Huynh, Hoang Quoc Dung and many other journalists from Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong Newspapers and other media organisations in Vietnam for their support without which this study would have been impossible.

And finally, I thank my dear husband for “pushing” me to finish this prolonged project!



**Author's Declaration**

**I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.**

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### 1. Introduction

Ten reporters from one news agency go to the same press conference? *Not that unusual even if a bit extreme!*

Three or four reporters from a 65-staff newspaper go to the same small event such as a press conference or a building construction opening ceremony? *Everyday life!*

At 8.30 am, an experienced three-member TV crew goes out in the channel's logoed van with full equipment without any clue what they will be covering. Different topics are discussed on the way. The whole morning (in the van) is spent discussing, travelling here and there non-stop and waiting for news opportunities. After several failures, they decide to do a story that is suggested by the van driver. By 3pm, they manage to do a few ten-minute interviews for a 30-second report that is broadcast a few days later. Editors back at the station have no clue what they will get before they see the news packages that are video-edited just before air-time. *Why surprise? Nothing new!*

Working as a journalist and journalism trainer in Vietnam for nearly two decades, I have often heard of or seen those types of practices. Many journalists go to the field without having discussed with their editors what news they will cover, leaving a lot of room for chance. Many editors wait in the office until almost deadline without knowing what the main story will be. A huge number of stories are written but never published, while the editors keep complaining about the shortage of stories supplied.

Everyone sees that there is a clear communication problem at their workplace which leads to huge inefficiency, but no one acts to solve this problem. At the end of the day, it does not matter how you work, you still get salary every month. Also who would appreciate it if you tried to be different?

However, this situation has been changing. External economic, political and social factors have been forcing media organizations to change their way of operating.

These communication/journalistic practices, as well as the new situation affecting the news media, inspired me to study them in a systematic way.

My argument is: Economic liberalization means news media need to develop new strategies and business models to replace state subsidies. However, political control limits the ability of news media to develop these strategies; and thus, professional journalism aimed at newsroom efficiency is a key to success. Communication in its turn is one of the key aspects of obtaining efficiency.

## **2. What is this research project about?**

This ethnographic study, which involves two case studies being Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong newspapers, is about the **strategies** Vietnamese news media (with the focus on print media) have developed to respond to external factors.

Vietnam is a poor country with a dominating state, which stresses the core role of the Vietnamese Communist Party plus other official organisations and institutions, suggesting that other groups and societal activities have little or no influence in the political system (Kerkvliet 2001a; Kerkvliet 2001b). The country's development speed is slowed down by corruption, the lack of transparency, the one-party system and the lack of cross-check mechanisms (BBC 2009).

However, this thesis is ***not*** about democracy in Vietnam, *or* about freedom of press or expression, *or* about democratization of the media in Vietnam (although, to put the media operational practices in their context, some background information which includes discussion of freedom of the press and freedom of expression is provided).

The research focuses on news media although other media might be mentioned where appropriate. Within this thesis, the terms “news media” and “the press” are used interchangeably. In Vietnam news media refers to officially registered mainstream news media. All print newspapers and magazines, online newspapers, television and radio stations by law are/or should be the mouthpieces of the government, or the Communist Party and public organisations, etc. and, thus, need to be registered as such. No private news media are allowed. Therefore, public fora, blogs, general websites or webpages, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. are not officially considered “news media”. However, as these have been playing a bigger

and bigger role in the society and politics as well as affecting the mainstream media, they are discussed where appropriate.

Due to time and resource limitations, while acknowledging the importance of other departments such as advertising and sales as well as the inter-dependence between them and the content departments, the study only focuses on the newsroom activities. The term "newsroom", as used in Vietnam, includes the content work, workforce and the workplace where content-related activities happen every day.

The second important part of the research is about the **problems that hinder efficiency** and **newsroom operational strategies** to correct the problems, as well as the role of personnel, structure, culture, practices and communication in assisting or hindering the implementation process.

Thus, it is a study of newsroom management of both *strategic* and *operational* levels.

The study answers the following questions (in logic order):

1. What are the strategies Vietnamese media are employing to cope with the changing environment including subsidy/cost cuttings and increased competition while under closed political and ownership control?
2. What are the problems that hinder newsroom efficiency at Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre?
3. What are the newsrooms' operational strategies to correct the problems?
4. What are the barriers to changes in the newsrooms?
5. What is the role of communication in newsroom management?

### 3. Conceptual Framework

This thesis adopts two levels of analysis and explanation.

#### *3.1. Strategic management: Changes in the industry and the media companies' development directions*

Much research on strategic management in general and media management in particular suggests that changes in business environment will lead to changes in management strategies (Collins, Garnham et al. 1988; Ozanich and Wirth 1993; Kotter 1995; Sparks 1995; Hoskins, McFadyen et al. 1997; Albarran and Chan-Olmsted 1998; Goodwin 1998; Picard 1998; Golding and Murdock 2000; Lacy 2000; Pavlik 2000; Cairncross 2001; Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Preston 2001; Albarran 2002; Compaine 2002; Doyle 2002; Hesmondhalgh 2002; Tuchman 2002; Majoribanks 2003; Picard 2003; Boczkowski 2004; Hollifield 2004; Pavlik 2004; Singer 2004; Sparks 2004; Aris and Bughin 2005; Klinenberg 2005; Kotter 2006; Deuze 2007; Kueng 2008; Saltzis and Dickinson 2008, etc.)

Vietnam is one of a very few remained communist countries with a single ruling party named Communist Party of Vietnam. It has a poor economy and a low reputation in terms of governance indicators (transparency, voice and accountability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, control of corruption). (Kaufmann, Kraay et al. 2010). There are limitations to freedom of thought, expression and religion (Ta 1988; Duiker 1995).

There are no private news media in Vietnam. They all are owned by either Party or Government of different levels, or different associations or public organisations.<sup>1</sup>

While the media used to be fully state-subsidized and serve simply as a 'mouthpiece' of the Government and the Communist Party, nowadays, according to the Press Bureau's head, most newspapers and television/radio stations have become self-financed and market-oriented (Interviewee 1). The communist-party-run news

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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed account of the country's political, economical and social both history and current situations, as well as the media and the players in the media field, see appendix 1, which provides the platform to understand why certain things happen in the industry in general and in individual newsrooms in particular, how and why the media have developed certain strategies and the reasons for their successes or failures.

organizations are still subsidized but the trend is the subsidies are being cut down sharply. Interestingly, as a prominent politician and a former manager of *Nhan Dan*, the biggest party newspaper, said: “Now no one obeys the Central Committee Party’s Decree 11<sup>2</sup>”. The reason simply is the state has cut the budget for big Vietnamese organisations to buy newspapers so they have to be more selective<sup>3</sup> (Interviewee 9).

The fight for audiences and advertising among newspapers, especially the biggest ones, is getting more and more severe. Even the biggest daily *Tuoi Tre*, which has a long established reputation, the highest circulation and a huge amount of advertisements, has recently been very worried about aggressive competition from others who had for years been far below its “standard”. *Tuoi Tre*’s news editor recently said: “We’re getting jumped! We really feel threatened” (Interviewee 32).

Vietnamese newspapers are under the pressure of:

- digital technological developments which facilitate production and consumption of other media products and other ways of consuming news products;
- the liberalization of other markets such as telecommunications and publishing (because of the WTO) which facilitate intervention and competition from foreign players;
- state subsidy cuts;
- advertising decrease due to financial problems;
- increased readers’ autonomy; etc. (see appendix 1)

These external pressures are summarised in the darker boxes in Figure 1.

This study, therefore, explores the changes that affect the Vietnamese news media and examines the strategies the media companies are employing to cope with the changes in order to survive and develop.

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<sup>2</sup> Decree 11 forces big Vietnamese organizations to buy party newspaper copies.

<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese big organisations and businesses, especially the state-owned, were supposed to buy ‘important’ newspapers copies (for ideological purposes) and usually had them paid.

### ***3.2. Operational management: processes and changes inside the newsroom (newsroom strategy implementation and results - how the company produces content on a day to day basis – the newsroom environment and practices)***

The issue of **efficiency** is the journalists' biggest concern (Schlesinger 1987). Efficiency “serves the organisational need of getting work done on time” (Tuchman 1978: 78).

Media management literature suggests that media performance and productivity are influenced by different factors: organizational culture and creativity, organizational structure, individual cognition and learning, management and leadership, etc. (McQuail 1992; Cuilenburg 2000; Golding 2000; Lacy 2000; Picard 2000; Kueng 2007a; Kueng 2007b; Kueng 2008, etc.)

“No group or organization can exist without communication.” (Robbins and Judge 2008:158). Communication is “the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary)<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, communication is “the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)<sup>5</sup>.

Within this thesis, by ‘communication’ or ‘internal communication’, I mean those verbal oral or written discussions/interactions, by and among journalists of different positions, that have anything to do with, or affect and are affected by, the content and the production of content.

Communication is a vital factor, because it is the essence of any institution. Once during our visit<sup>6</sup> to the BBC, Nigel Charters, the BBC’s multimedia newsroom managing director told us ‘*Managing a newsroom is mostly managing people – working with people.*’ How would one work with people if one did not communicate with them?

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/learner/communication>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communication>

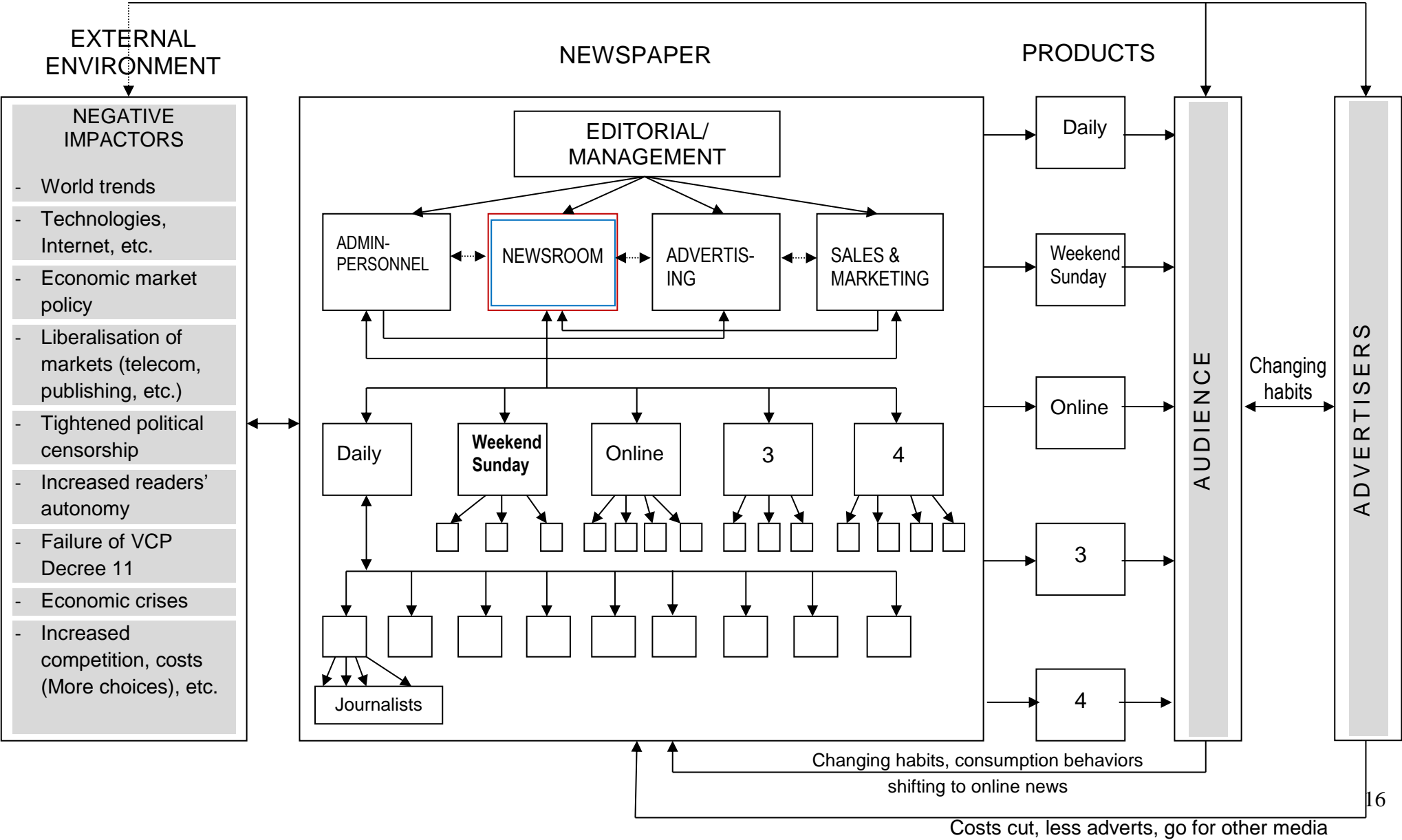
<sup>6</sup> A visit by Westminster University’s students of Master degree on Media Management in 2008.

Unfortunately, communication has been given limited attention by both media managers and media researchers as the literature review and the empirical research show. This research, therefore, tries to fill the gap by focusing on communication while exploring the newsroom practices and different factors that affect newsrooms' efficiency.

Using media economics, media management, news production, organizational behavior and organizational communication theory, the researcher developed a model of the factors affecting newsroom's efficiency (figure 2 below).

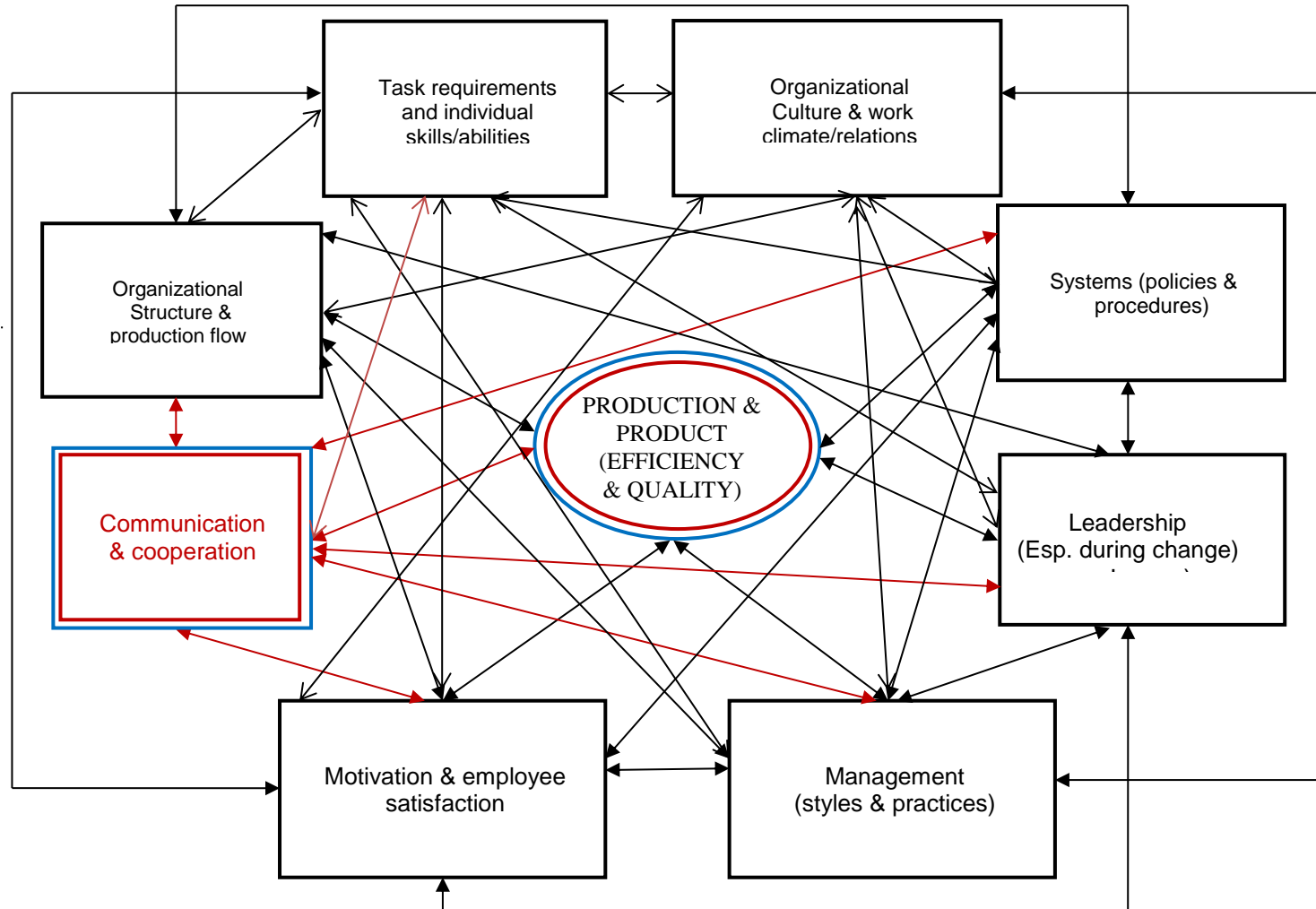


FIGURE 1: FACTORS AFFECTING NEWSPAPERS



## NEWSROOM EFFECTIVENESS

FIGURE 2: INTERNAL FACTORS AFFECTING NEWSROOM EFFICIENCY



#### **4. A journalist-turn-academic ethnographic approach to media production**

Researchers use case studies "with the attention of shedding light on general processes " (Priest 1996).

Applying the conceptual frameworks mentioned above, the researcher examines two dailies – *Tuoi Tre*, the biggest, most successful and influential newspaper, and *Tien Phong*, a typical middle-ranged one, to try to find “best practice” and “typical practice” and the causes of their successes and/or failures.

The researcher has long experience in journalism (as reporter and editor in different platforms) and media training in Vietnam which allows direct access to media houses and practitioners and opens them up for sharing.

In order to answer the research questions, an ethnographic mix-method approach involving observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, document analysis and a little discourse analysis is employed in order to make use of the advantages and limit the disadvantages of each individual method. This helps better understand the complexity and the dynamics of the media production and the media producers in Vietnam where not only economical, organisational and professional ideological but also strict political constraints prevail.

The fieldwork went well despite some delays at the beginning due to permission to access the proposed newspapers. There were changes to the original plan, which will be discussed in detail in the methodology chapter.

The fieldwork brought thick data which then was analysed and presented according to the model (figure 2) discussed above.

#### **5. Why this research?**

A Western media and journalism professor once asked me: “Why are you interested in ‘communication’ inside Vietnamese newsrooms? There is no communication! There are only army orders!” I would argue, even if it was only army orders, it would still be army communication, and would still be a legitimate subject for study.

However, the Western professor's view reflects a broader conception of Vietnamese media, as extremely authoritarian and undemocratic, only doing what the Vietnamese Government and Communist Party ask them to do.

It is natural that international readers are more interested in the media system as a whole, especially one of a country seemingly totally different from theirs, than what is happening every day in a local newsroom. Some foreign researchers (Ta 1988; Forbes, Hull et al. 1991; Thayer 1992; Marr 1993; Porter 1993; Tonnesson 1993; Turley and Selden 1993; Fforde and Goldstone 1995; Dang and Beresford 1998; Forrester 1998; Heng 1999; Koh 2000; Abuza 2001; Marr 2003; McCargo 2004; Borton, Davidsson et al. 2005; Borton 2005; Pham 2005) have studied the Vietnamese media system, if there is such a 'system'. However they only look at the media from policy, decision making and socio-political perspectives. These researchers often have little physical access, if any, to media houses.

While fully acknowledging and expressing gratitude to these researchers' contribution to (my) knowledge, I would suggest that this research body presents a limited view. In particular, this approach implicitly over-emphasizes the influence of political forces and neglects the media's own dynamics.<sup>7</sup> Crudely, the fact that Vietnamese government/party has closed down some newspapers or arrested some journalists does not necessarily mean all the news media themselves are authoritarian or they do not at all do journalism. This research will hopefully help reduce this gap in understanding.

My argument is, even if there are political (and other) forces that influence the media's decision making – like setting a frame, there is still a lot of room for media to operate themselves and even to push the boundaries of that frame. Internal structure, culture, production flow and processes, and communication are among the aspects that individual newsrooms more or less have sole control of.

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<sup>7</sup> Among the prominent researchers who study Vietnam, Carl Thayer from the Australian Ministry of Defence, has had direct contact with some Vietnamese high figures and, thus, is informed about the Vietnamese situation as well Vietnam's policy making process including in the media field. However, Thayer recently confirms that his informants are no longer in the government and, therefore "even though they are still well informed, they are no longer in the centre of the decision making mechanism." VOA (2005). Interview with Prof. Carl Thayer about Vietnam's present and future situation, VOA.

This is not yet to discuss his access to the media houses themselves.

In Vietnam, no systematic research has been found on either the issues of internal communication, newsroom efficiency or media management practices and strategies. Indeed, despite the fact that Vietnam has quite a few universities and research institutions, the number of empirical research projects is limited. In the media field, because of its impacts on the society and its development, more and more attention is paid to media research among Vietnamese scholars. However, most of the published papers are small-scale studies that often deal with practical skills and/or ethics of journalists.

Recently, there have been some studies on media development in Vietnam done by foreign sponsors<sup>8</sup> or their appointed independent consultants. This research body focuses on the changes in terms of media economies, numbers and quality of content, interactions with audience, technical improvement, etc. It also discusses media ethics, laws, and implications on democracy and human rights. However, like other foreign-based studies, it only offers general descriptions of the media system as a whole rather than focusing on individual newsrooms' and therefore do not help test the hypothesis of this study: that one of the most important factors affecting a news organization's performance is newsroom internal communication. This issue, I believe, is the key factor especially in Vietnam where the media are politically strictly censored because it is one of the few things individual newsrooms have sole control of.

I have nearly 20-year experience in journalism and media training in Vietnam which allows me direct access to media houses and practitioners. This access, I believe, is impossible for many other Vietnamese, let alone foreign, researchers. This research, therefore, operates from an 'insider' point of view, and tries to examine the media in their everyday working life. By doing this, I hope I can contribute to a more complete picture and help explain why certain things happen the way they happen in the media policy making process.

In addition to contributing to knowledge about Vietnamese media, I believe this research also contributes to the fields of organizational behaviours, employee communication, management, etc. The literature review shows that media organizations rarely appear in the literature on internal communication or

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<sup>8</sup> See chapter II, part 2.2.8.4.

organizational behaviours and management and there is a lack of organizational management and communication studies within media management literature.

The main purpose of this research is to contribute to knowledge about news production, media management, communication and to a smaller degree organizational behaviour and management. However, in addition, I strongly believe that even academic research should not only reflect the reality but also help improve it. So, finally, I would like my research study to have some practical use. Having worked with quite a few media and journalists as well as foreign-aid media development projects, I have observed that the attempts to improve the media's professionalism are generally more successful than those directly and explicitly aimed at "improving democracy of Vietnam through the democratization of the media". Therefore, by focusing on the newsrooms' own practices, I hope my research will:

- Contribute to improve newsroom and newsroom communication practices and, thus, the productivity and performance of the news media industry in Vietnam by providing the media managers and practitioners with an opportunity to reflect on their professional activities and perceptions. I believe that by becoming financially independent through improved productivity and quality, the media will gradually become politically independent and, thus, will help improve the democracy of the society(whatever it is); and
- Help provide insights into the media industry and understanding of how media organizations are similar to and/or different from other types of organizations; and how changes in the overall external environment affect the strategic and operational choices of the media organizations. This will help interpret, understand and possibly intervene with future developments of the media;
- Be of benefit to other types of businesses, especially knowledge-based ones, in Vietnam by reflecting organizational culture, leadership, and communication during changes, etc.

## **6. The presentation of this thesis**

Chapter I introduces the researcher's interest to the topic, provides short background and briefly presents the thesis/study's reasoning, content, scope and methods of enquiry.

The next two chapters, II and III, discuss theoretical and methodological frameworks for this study.

Chapter IV discusses strategies employed by Vietnamese media organizations in general and two case studies being Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre newspapers in particular in response to the changes in the country and the media industry. This chapter helps put the two studied newspapers in the whole media context.

Chapter V contains the main body of the research results gained from the fieldwork. They describe and explain Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong's political positions in the industry, their background, and basic information such as circulation, staffs, key personnel, the issues that they identify as problems hindering newsroom efficiency as well as their operational strategies to fix the problems. The chapters then go deeper into newsroom environment to explore the implementation and the results of the newsrooms' strategies to understand the factors that affect the process and results.

Chapter VI further discusses the research results from the case studies in the reflection on the literature. The chapter brings out the importance of internal communication among different factors that affect newsrooms efficiency. It also discusses this research study's contribution to knowledge and suggests future research.

Although this research focuses on strategies and communication practices in Vietnamese newsrooms using two newspapers as case studies, not Vietnamese media as a whole democratic or undemocratic system, a big section (see Appendix 1) is devoted to describing the media field as to provide the readers with context that might help explain how and why things happen the way they do in individual newsrooms, as well as their possible results or consequences. This includes a brief introduction of the environment; a historical account of media and journalism development over different significant periods of time corresponding to changes in economic, political, social and ideological environment; key players

in the field and their roles; current situation and trends, etc. The historical part is the result of a literature review while the discussion of current situation is resulted from the researcher's observation, official interviews and informal talks with many key field players such as media policy makers, domestic and international media trainers and researchers, editors in chief, and journalists of different positions from different media, as well as from information I obtained from public and semi-public forums which I cross checked with the key informants mentioned above.



## **CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **1. Background**

As mentioned in chapter I and discussed in details in Appendix 1, no private news media are allowed in Vietnam. The media are under constant political control and self-censorship is the norm. This has not changed much since the American War finished in 1975 in terms of “sensitive” issues such as the government or party’s political strategies or ideologies (especially in terms of socialism or communism-orientation.) Those who pose any danger to the government or party are not tolerated, neither are individuals who promote pluralism.

However, over the time, the news media in Vietnam have moved from serving as simply a mouthpiece or propaganda tool of the government in the wartime to a means of providing the people with information, entertainment, and education. They have also been moving toward the status of relatively independent institutions to put a check on corruption in the government and economic organisations. However, this role of the media is still weak and, thus, the media sometimes are seen as a means for the different oppositional forces within the government and party to fight against each other for their own, not the nation’s, interests (see Appendix 1).

Beside the political censorship/control, other factors affecting the news media can be summarised as follows:

- Economic liberalisation (state subsidy cuts) forces the news media to find other ways to support themselves.
- Although Vietnam has not committed anything about news media content while signing its WTO agreements in 2006, the post-WTO liberalisation of telecommunication and other commodity markets, e.g. printing papers, mobile phones, etc. has a great impact on the news media content production;
- Vietnam has signed international treaties and conventions, which makes it subject to international monitoring and pressure to enhance laws and legal practices such as human rights, freedom of expression and press, gender equality, etc. This is a good basis for the media to be further liberalised.

- Technological developments such as internet with its applications, satellite and cable television, fixed and mobile phone, etc. have changed media audience behaviours, forcing the media to change accordingly.
- Technology also promotes increased and more frequent communication between people inside and outside Vietnam which makes it difficult for the government to keep the door-closing policy and makes it easier for citizens to raise their voice on alternative media;
- The wide distribution of international (in fact mainly American or British and more recently also South Korean and Japanese) cultural products, as well as greater chances of Vietnamese people travelling abroad have also increased information sharing and possibility to check the information provided by the party and government oriented media.

While these different factors are inter-influential, and it is difficult to identify causality, it does appear that economic and technological factors are probably the ultimate drivers of all the changes. Those news outlets that are more daring to push boundaries are also those that have greater economic independence.

The biggest change is the switch from originally money spenders to money makers. Except for the local party and government's print newspapers and websites, which still are subsidised but the trend is also a sharp subsidy cut, most news organisations are self-sufficient and quite many are making big profits.

The end of subsidies, or so called in Vietnamese way "the press being thrown out to the street"<sup>9</sup>, means some important things:

- The news media are "forced", or in many cases want, to be financially independent, meaning they have to compete to survive and make profits, which leads to the following:
- The government/party control over the content is automatically loosened (in Vietnamese case, the control is now limited to what the government and/or

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<sup>9</sup> The phrase "throw someone out to the street" means provide no shelter, protection or support. Vietnamese parents often threaten to throw their children to the street if they do not obey.

the party could confine the laws to) and the government/public ownership becomes only nominal;

- The media can, and are pursuing it, somewhat practise their role as a checker, as well as start influencing back the government/party (see Appendix 1).

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These come in steps. And I believe the first step is essential for the next to happen. Therefore, I would like to find out how the media are trying to stand on their own feet. What are their competitive strategies given that they still operate in such a political frame as analysed earlier? As survival is the main concern at this stage, what do they do and what could they do in order to maximise productivity and, thus, profits and reduce costs?

Also, the biggest changes obviously go to the same direction of a market economy – competition, concentration, customer-orientation, etc. which all imply and require improved communication. So, what are the newsrooms' communication strategies and practices and how they affect their operation and strategy implementation? What are the other factors that also affect news production?

Those are the questions I would like to answer.

As very little research has been done about Vietnamese newsrooms, media economics and strategies; I had to review international literature. I looked at how scholars from a variety of disciplines have addressed the questions of media strategies and organisational communication in newsrooms and the text below discusses the theories I found relevant.

This literature review is divided into two main parts. Part one sets a theoretical framework to find out how the print newsrooms are strategically responding to the (mostly) external changes described earlier and in Appendix 1. Part two informs my research design to answer the questions about the factors affecting the newsroom efficiency and strategy implementation process and the role of internal communication.

## **2. Media strategies: Media economics and media management as framework**

Many researchers are interested in the economic side of the media industries in general and news media and news production in particular (Picard 1989; Sparks 1995; Albarran and Chan-Olmsted 1998; Goodwin 1998; Picard 1998; Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Albarran 2002; Doyle 2002; etc.).

Media management, compared to the other aspects of media studies such as media production, content, audience, impacts, etc., is still a young and under-researched field (Albarran, Chan-Olmsted et al. 2006; Mierzejewska and Hollifield 2006; Kueng 2008). As a specialized area, media management is the focus of only a small group of scholars compared to mass communication as a whole or to organizational studies. However, this research body has made ‘remarkable progress’ in the development of theory and has contributed significantly to understanding the behaviour of media companies. (Albarran, Chan-Olmsted et al. 2006). Considering the severe changes happening in the media industries, media management scholars confirm the urgent need to develop this field of study (see Aris and Bughin 2005; Albarran 2006; Kueng 2008).

Many of scholars studying media management seem to have extended their initial interest in media economics to broader management perspectives. Therefore, as my literature review reveals, much research has been done about media management from economic-financial point of view.

Research into management in the media reflects changes in its strategic environment (Kueng 2008: 6). The media economics and media management literature helps explain how economic and financial forces affect business strategies, media content, media operations and developments. This provides a vital part of the framework for addressing the research questions, especially the first set of questions about the media strategies, of this study.

### ***2.1. Distinct economic characteristics of the media***

This section looks at some key distinctive economic characteristics of the media and their effects on how the media are structured. Croteau and Hoynes (2001: 1) began their book this way: “In important respects, the business of media is unique.” It is widely agreed in media economics literature that media industries

are unique because they create one product but participate in two separate good and service markets called ‘a *dual market*’, the two commodities of which are media products (radio or television programmes, newspaper articles, etc.) and audiences. Media sell news or entertainment content to audiences and audiences to advertisers (Albarran, 2002, Picard, 1989, Croteau and Hoynes, 2001, Doyle, 2002).

Most authors also agree that when media products are bought and sold the thing that is being exchanged is meaning although they may use different words such as “texts”, “content”, “ideas, information and culture”. It is the message, not the medium that provides value to the user and the message is immaterial or intangible. (Albarran, 2002, Croteau and Hoynes, 2001, Doyle, 2002) Therefore, *immateriality* is considered one of the distinctive features of media and culture.

Because media products are immaterial, they are not destroyed by the act of consumption or in other words, “they can be consumed by one user without diminishing the quantity of the product available to others” (Hollifield, 2004: 87). Thus, most media products qualify as *public goods*, with which the normal price mechanisms do not work.

As media products are not destroyed by the act of consumption, they have *high initial production costs but very low reproduction costs*. Nearly all the costs of making media products are fixed and up-front as full value of any product “cannot be assessed until after the producer has paid almost the full cost of creating it” (Hollifield 2004: 87). However, once the ‘first copy’ is made, all subsequent copies are relatively cheap to reproduce. The reproduction cost is even as low as zero or near zero in case of broadcasts, records, online, etc. As a result of the low reproduction costs, it is easy for the media products to be pirated and made available free of charge.

Another economic characteristic of the media is *novelty*. This is resulted from the fact that what the media sell is the meaning. Once the meaning or the content has been consumed, the consumers will not usually want to consume it again and again. And then, as Collins et al. put it: “new value can only be derived from a new, novel product.” (1988:7). In other words, it is a feature of media goods that they usually have a *short shelf-life*.

Thirdly, the ‘*Nobody knows anything*’ rule applies for the media production as the way media audiences use media goods is very volatile and unpredictable. There is “no surefire formula for making a hit” (Micklethwait, 1989: 4). This, together with piracy, novelty and high up-front costs make media production a particularly *risky business*.

Because media products are characterised by the public-nature and, thus, high initial production costs and low marginal costs, *economies of scale* and *economies of scope* “are highly prevalent features of the media industry” although they can exist in any other industries. Economies of scale are present when the cost of providing an extra unit of a good falls as the scale of output expands. Economies of scope are achieved through multi-product production and they are common in media because the nature of media output makes it possible for a product created for one market to be reformatted and sold through another (Doyle, 2002: 13-4).

## **2.2. Media Organisations’ Strategies**

As mentioned earlier, media production is financially a particularly risky business. In order to *offset the risks*, media industries often apply some *strategies* such as advertising heavily; retaining a continuing link with consumers, understanding and shaping the market (always in R&D mood); and doing in the future what was successful in the past. The media industries are also well aware of what Micklethwait (1989: 5) calls the ‘*hit rule*’ - most of the profit comes from a tiny part of the output. Therefore, their strategy often is ‘throwing mud against the wall and seeing what sticks’ (Laing 1985; Negus 1999; cited in Hesmondhalgh 2002) – producing more rather than less as the more products are produced, the better chance some of them will become hits and profitable.

Keung’s (2008) shows a continual weakening of mass market model and an increasingly active role for consumers, or in other words the “demassification and emergence of the niche media”. The author presents a chart of the evolution of media content, which is changing from mass to niche and to participatory/peer (or interactive) models (p.85-86).

All of the strategies mentioned above are to reduce risks and make profits. And higher profits will be enjoyed through economies of scale and scope. In order to

implement the strategies and achieve these economies, the media have had many major structural changes in recent years.

The production of any good or service involves a supply chain, usually requiring several stages that are interdependent. This means that the whole chain will be ruined if a link is broken, i.e. newspaper edition cannot be sold without distributors. *Integration* unites different elements of the supply chain.

*Horizontal integration* involves firms who are engaged in the same activity or at the same stage in the supply chain. A media corporation that is horizontally integrated can enjoy labour and, thus, production cost reduction; less competition for audiences and audience time or can own many different types of media products (Croteau and Hoynes 2001), thus can “balance itself against the ‘nobody knows anything’ risk (Micklethwait 1989:6). According to Doyle (2002:22), in the media industry, the prevalence of economies of scale and scope makes horizontal expansion a very attractive strategy.

*Vertical integration* involves expanding over different stages of the process of production and distribution. Vertical integration generally results in reduced transaction costs for the enlarged firm (Doyle 2002: 23; OECD 2003), so that the firm can enjoy economies of scale.

*Diagonal integration* is when firms are involved into new business areas. For example, a telephone company may merge with an internet service provider and gain profits as both kinds of services are distributed jointly across the same infrastructure – the telephone line.

*Globalisation* is essentially integration across borders. More and more media companies are targeting foreign markets as many domestic markets are saturated and because “by distributing existing media products to foreign markets, media companies are able to tap a lucrative source of revenue at virtually no additional cost” (Croteau and Hoynes 2001:92).

Integration limits competition by raising the barriers to market entry and leads to *concentration* of ownership and sources of advertising for the media. Highly concentrated firms who can spread production costs across wider product and geographic markets will, of course, benefit from natural economies of scale and scope in the media (Hoskins, McFadyen et al. 1997; Doyle 2002:22)

Integration makes media firms much stronger to enjoy economies of scale and scope as the economies are defined as the “economies available to firms ‘large enough to engage efficiently in multi-product production and associated large scale distribution, advertising and purchasing’ (Lipsey and Chrystal 1995:880; cited in Doyle 2002:14).

In conclusion, the fact that the media are characterised by their immaterial or public-natured products as well as high production/marginal cost ratio leads to the fact that economies of scale and scope are prevalent in the industry. These economies, in their turn, often affect the way the media are structured. The trends toward integration, globalisation and concentration have been seen in the media all over the world.

With the arrival and development of many digital technologies especially the internet, many scholars (Albarran and Chan-Olmsted 1998; Golding and Murdock 2000; Croteau and Hoynes 2001) believe that digitalisation is transforming the whole media industry.

### ***2.3. Print newspaper situation and strategies***

“Hardly any other industry has experienced such an immense change over the last years as the newspaper industry,” according to the Scandinavian International Management Institute<sup>10</sup>. This is widely agreed by media practitioners and researchers all over the world (Aris and Bughin 2005; WAN 2007; Kueng 2008).

In developed countries, print newspapers’ circulation, readership and penetration are all decreasing (Willis 1988; Picard 2003; Price 2006). Many newspapers are disappearing (Tuchman 2002; WAN 2008).

In some developing countries in Asia and Africa there has been an increase in newspaper sales for the last few years (WAN 2008). However, WAN also notes that in those countries the internet penetration is still low and that many newspapers are struggling financially.

Generally, the trends all over the world include:

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.simi.dk/article.aspx?articleid=+371+371>



- Emergence and development of new media like satellite, cable TV, Internet, etc. which constitute big competitors in providing news and information as well as attracting advertising;
- more free newspapers;
- changing consumption/reading behaviours;
- advertising decrease due to global economic downturns, etc.

In order to cope with such changing environment, the newspaper industry has responded by cost-cutting and consolidation. The last few years have seen more and more big newspapers restructure themselves (WAN 2007). However, WAN does not have specific information about Vietnamese newsrooms. WAN's data about Vietnamese media system in general are based on the CNN Fact Book and are not updated.

Over the last decades, newspapers's strategies have included cooperative arrangements, varying content and products formats to reach more audience, specializing content, changing presentation of news, providing more analysis in the efforts to differentiate themselves with the competitor television, change of protocol, running online versions; offer free commuter newspapers, building trusted relationship with their readers, market fragmentation, cost-cutting, etc. (Doyle 2002; Tuchman 2002; Aris and Bughin 2005); content upgrades, special supplement and magazines, promotional offers of books, CDs, DVDs, free subscription trials, improved home and newsstand distribution (Kueng 2008). Most recently, convergent newsrooms are becoming the norms (WAN 2007; WAN 2008).

So, the media industry is changing quickly which represents a big challenge to managers tasked with planning strategies and implementing them successfully (Kueng 2008:1). The situation is more or less the same in Vietnam. So, the question is how Vietnamese news media strategically coping with the changes namely subsidy cuts, increased costs, changing ownership, changing censorship, changing audience and advertisers' behaviours, etc.?

### **3. Newsroom efficiency management: news production/newsroom sociology, organizational behavior and organizational communication as framework**

While media economics and media management literature helps analyse how news companies manage at the strategic level, i.e. helps understand media strategies at the organization and industry levels, it does not help show how far the strategies change the operational practice. In other words, it helps understand what strategies are employed and why, NOT how they are employed and what the results are, as well as what factors affect the change process and the results. Therefore, news production studies, which offer understanding of the “actual processes of production inside cultural institutions and organisations” and “a sophisticated appreciation of the complex and ramified nature of editorial systems” (Schlesinger 1987:xxxii) was consulted to help answering this study’s next research questions about newsroom efficiency management.

#### ***3.1. News production***

A lot of scholars have shown their interests in newsrooms and their empirical studies have helped describe newsroom dynamics within organisational culture. The studies mainly focus on news selection and factors affecting it.

“News values” or “news criteria” are “a concept used often in journalism studies and education to describe the gate-keeping practices of the mainstream news media. They are defined as qualities of events that increase the likelihood of their being covered in the news”. There are too many lists. (Braun accessed 2010).

Galtung and Ruge (1973) emphasized four conditions for an event to be considered news: frequency, unambiguity, continuity and composition which are criticized by John Venable (1993) as purely operational. Alan Bell (1991) added four conditions: competition, co-optation, prefabrication and predictability. For an extensive review of news values, see Braun (accessed 20.10.2010).

According to Tuchman (1978), news is enmeshed in the social organisation of newswork, which is contextually embedded.

Using three levels of analyses: i) the constraints of newswork and resources available to newswriters, ii) newswriters as professionals and newsrooms as

complex organisations, iii) how newswriters determine facts and frame events and debates pertinent to the shared civic life, Tuchman (1978) did a ten-year ethnographic study on some television and newspaper newsrooms. Tuchman's examination of different factors namely:

- The hierarchical system of 'information gatherers' and the interaction within the system;
- What and by whom (which sources, which specific reporters) editors prefer to publish;
- Newsworthiness discussions and negotiations in the newsrooms;
- Access to news events and things that influence the access;
- Things that influence the news assessment such as time, space, organisational specialisation and arrangements including working flow, working hours and personnel, news net, etc.
- Categorisation and typification of different types of news and ways to deal with them;
- Newsmen's perception and their impact on news presentation and narrative;
- The fact finding and sources using, what kinds of 'facts' and 'sources' are chosen to be reported, how that is processed in the newsrooms among journalists;
- Relationship among reporters of a same organisation as well as of same beats but different organisations;
- Reporters' relationship to sources;

demonstrates how newswork transforms everyday occurrences into news events. It proves that those factors both guide the search for news and perpetually reconstitute themselves as the frames for news. Thus, Tuchman is able to confirm that news is a constructed reality or "social construction of reality", not "reality" itself.

Regarding newswork efficiency, flexibility is very important to newswork and reporters as professionals often negotiate overlapping lines of territorial, institutional, and topical responsibilities. Everyone must be capable of doing everyone else's work, meaning specialists must be able to work as generalists, and

vice versa (p67). News organisations maintain flexibility and save money by discouraging complex bureaucracy and by encouraging reporters' professionalism which means "knowing how to get a story that meets the organisational needs and standards" (Tuchman 1978:65-66).

Locating stories requires having news sources and knowing sources brings participation in a common reportorial culture (p.71) and professional status (p.68). News stories, news sources and reporters are hierarchically arranged. (p.69). Stories are given based on personal sources and status. High-status reporters get 'bigger stories' and reporters accept this and cooperate with each other even if that means breaching current specialties (p.70).

Regarding communication, i.e. newsmen's interaction, and professional culture, Tuchman (1978) examines what he calls "professionalism sharing" also among colleagues from one organisation in a small bureau but mostly among newsmen from different organisations.

Within a newsroom, journalists help with each other with minor facts which "serves the organisational need of getting work done on time" (Tuchman 1978:78). When one reporter enterprises a story in another's specialty/beat, the latter is expected to follow professional protocol meaning to approve and help out as "any privately generated idea or information is the explicit property of its originator" (p.73). By approving and helping out the second reporter shows that he/she is a helpful colleague and he can expect to get help from the first reporter in the future when he needs it. However, reporters maintain their professional autonomy by "protecting their private sources and specialties from other's encroachment - while trying to poach others' material" (p.78).

Within an organisation/newsroom, the editor is very important. His goodwill is essential for reporters' career advancement. Therefore reporters have to do their best to appear competent to the editor (Tuchman 1978:77)<sup>11</sup>

Reporters maintain their professional autonomy from editorial supervision, or in other words, maintain control of their work, by "hoarding sources" and "sharing

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<sup>11</sup> Tuchman does not explore in details the communication/interaction practices in newsrooms including the relationship between reporters and newsroom editors which my research focuses on. This could be because of the difference in newsroom structure between the BBC and Vietnamese newspapers. See chapter 4,5,6 for more details.

information” with their colleagues from both their organisation and other organisations (the latter being sharing information with competitors is not allowed according to every news organisation’s rule) (Tuchman 1978:74)

Similarly, Schlesinger (1987) believes that the production routines “have definite consequences in structuring news”. “The news we receive on any given day is not as unpredictable as much journalistic mythology would have us believe. Rather, the doings of the world are tamed to meet the needs of a production system in many respects bureaucratically organized” and “Organisation and ideology are in fact mutually reinforcing” (p.47).

Throughout the book (Schlesinger 1987), especially chapter 3 (The production of radio and television news), Schlesinger describes in details what happens in the newsrooms including the work/news flow, the journalists’ routines and discussions, etc. By describing the newsroom’s structure and routines/practices, i.e. the communication and working of the newsmen of different positions, Schlesinger (1987) found that the editorial system, editorial responsibility, diffusion of hierarchy, guidance and command structure and corporate ideology (being balance and impartiality, i.e. ‘neutral journalism’ in case of the BBC) act as the mediations of control that affect the ‘desired identity’ for newsmen, and outputs of the production in the ideological term. Interestingly, he notes that there is a high level of conformity, in terms of both news outputs and journalists’ identity, i.e. perceptions of themselves as journalists and of the BBC corporate ideology. As such, Schlesinger claims that there is a limited room for manoeuvre in the production of news.

Schlesinger (1987:83) also believes that “the newsmen’s production concepts are shaped by the constraints of time”, which has implications for the form and content of news (p.83) and the time-consciousness has a striking effect on newsmen’s basic practices (p99). “There is a constant problem of controlling the work processes to meet output times (p.83).

In the last chapter “The limits of change” Schlesinger (1987) also describes the “rather limited kinds of change” brought about by the changes of editors and “the ways in which these were interpreted within the newsrooms”(p.246). He noted that “newsmen seem largely unaware” of the wanted changes (p.247).

Schlesinger also sees that there is lack of co-ordination and competition with each other in production (which is the consequence of teams working separately), which leads to routine duplication in reporting arrangements, or puts a lot of pressure on reporters “who have to write separate pieces for the sequences and the news bulletins” and sometimes even conflicts and annoyance among the teams (p.250, 251).

Schlesinger notes that the distinction/division in teams and programmes (news/current affairs) creates “status” levels among journalists as well as has a cultural implication for the output/products and, thus, implies “a high degree of control over the organisation, selection, and transmission of knowledge” (p254) and “the present conceptual distinction has an impressively firm social reality in terms of established production routines. It is not surprising, therefore, that changes in news have taken place largely *within* existing terms of reference, for these pose definite limits to change.” (p254-255).

However Schlesinger does not explore the practical issues/problems that affect the production itself and the journalists’ (dis)satisfaction, which, in my experience, exists in all newsrooms regardless of their political and ideological stands. And these practical problems can in fact be changed if changes are wanted, unlike the ideological ones which are, according to Schlesinger (1987:272) and Tuchman (1978), difficult to change at departmental managerial level or by journalists themselves.

Another note is that, despite the fact that all the topics explored and discussed by Tuchman (1978) are important, interesting and relevant to media studies, when only studying journalists as ‘institutional workers’, not as ‘individuals’ as well, Tuchman has underestimated the role or the influence of individuals and, thus, leadership, which has proved to be very important by this research (to be discussed soon later) and by Schlesinger who notices that the changes in the BBC are generated by the changes of editors.

In terms of communication, the last chapter “The limits of change” (Schlesinger 1987) is probably the most relevant to my research questions. Schlesinger describes the (mostly limited) changes associated to the news editors/bosses. Interestingly, the author notices the fact that the staff journalists were very ill-informed of and, thus, sceptical and even critical of the change initiatives.

However, the staffs are mostly loyal to their production, whatever their reservations. Only in a particular case, the changes imposed by the boss resulted in many early retirements on one hand and “leap-frogging promotions for younger sub-editors who endorsed the theories of the new regime” on the other.

Overall, it is striking that there is an “almost entire absence of a radical critique” (Schlesinger 1987:267). The BBC’s bosses could exercise their power. Probably this is the reason why Schlesinger, while also discussing the “internal impact” of the changes associated with changes of editors which, in my view, shows the importance of internal/employee communication in newsrooms, does not explore either this communication factor in details or the possible ways to improve communication and, thus, results of change. Instead, he focuses more, again, the news judgement, the formats/styles/outputs of the production as well as the audience perspective.

Beside the editors/leaders, one possible source of change is the journalistic workforce itself, therefore it is illuminating to look at the journalists’ discussions about the defects of the system (Schlesinger 1987:266). According to Schlesinger, there is a lack of interest in demanding control by the workers. The legitimacy of the power structure (the highest level) is rarely questioned. Presentational style of news and ideology and practice of news production are hardly subjected to fundamental criticism at shop-floor level. Beside pay and conditions, criticism includes only about the way editors work, specific work style requirements, as well as the matters of efficiency (p268-269).

Mainly sub-editors complain about the intrusiveness and breadth of the editor of the day’s brief. The editor is considered as too overbearing, as limiting creativity and autonomy, as too involved in the production flow and in shaping the visual packages. This situation is interpreted very differently by the journalists, who believe it is the personal style of the editor that is problematic, and by the researcher Schlesinger, who claim that the editorial/structural role is part of a system and the editor’s intrusiveness “could be explained in relation to an ideology of extra-safe news and the needs of centralized bureaucratic control, rather than a slight tendency to megalomania.” (Schlesinger 1987:268) It is not certain on what basis Schlesinger’s view about the structural role of the editor in the system is on. This view, together with the belief that editors are merely “a

vehicle for higher managerial policy” (p.272), seems to ignore the dynamics of journalists as individuals who are often head-strong and who like to control but hate to be controlled, and leadership, which proves to be the driving force in newsroom change management as my case studies show.

### ***3.2. Convergence: As a strategy or a process?***

The questions about the relevance of the “classic” newsroom sociology in today’s life is shared by many researchers who study a relatively new phenomenon – newsroom convergence (Pavlik 2004; Singer 2004; Lawson-Borders 2006; Saltzis and Dickinson 2008).

Newswork or news production has changed very much in the last decade. There have been some structural changes (Boczkowski 2004; Klinenberg 2005; García-Avilés and Carvajal 2008) including:

- speeding up of the journalistic production process, increasing of monitoring of other media (Boczkowski 2004).
- Cherishing multi-skilling and multi-tasking meaning gathering, selecting, producing, and disseminating content via several platforms within a tight time limit (Boczkowski 2004; Deuze 2007).
- blurred lines among newspaper, radio, television, and online journalistic culture, as a result of constant reorganizing and restructuring of work, despite strong strives for a heterogeneous content being provided (Deuze 2007).
- development of atypical labor relations, that is, flexible, non-committed, and risk-filled job opportunities (International-Federation-of-Journalists 2006).

For a more detailed review of newswork literature, see Vobic (2010) who studies online journalists’ practices.

“Media convergence is like teenage sex. Everybody thinks everybody else is doing it. The few who are actually doing it aren’t very good at it.” (Haagerup 2002; Dailey, Demo et al. 2003).

There is no standardized definition of news or newsroom convergence and debates often occur “between those who see convergence simply as a



technological development driven by newly available digital tools and others who say convergence must be defined in terms of fundamental changes in story telling” (Dailey, Demo et al. 2003). The authors also claim that the lack of a precise definition poses problems for researchers trying to study how communication theories such as gatekeeping and innovation diffusion apply to new media as well as creates difficulties for professionals developing converged news operations.

Convergence is “some combination of technologies, products, staffs and geography amongst the previously distinct provinces of print, television and online media” (Singer 2004:3). The process includes “(increasing) cooperation and collaboration between formerly distinct media newsrooms and other parts of the modern media company” (Deuze 2007:140).

According to Garcia Avilés (2008), it is possible to analyse the phenomenon from at least four perspectives: technological, managerial, communicative and professional and that “all the four perspectives of convergence mentioned are undoubtedly present in the implementation of any converged newsroom.” However, most of the research found focuses on the professional perspective and none focuses on communicative aspect.

From professional aspect, convergence is reshaping the landscape of journalism in a variety of ways. Pavlik (2004:28) says: “newsroom structures, journalistic practices and news content are all evolving”.

Saltzis and Dickinson (2008), who study news production and the impact of media convergence - “the trend towards news reporting in more than one medium in formerly single-medium organisations”- on the practices of journalists, claim:

“Although journalism and the production of news have been widely analysed, discussions about the impact of new technologies and new systems of working have commonly been conducted from a distance. Sociological perspectives on news production have provided frameworks to help us comprehend the complexities of cultural production and the constraints encountered by journalists and their impact on the final product of news, but in contemporary studies of journalism the voices of journalists are surprisingly seldom heard.”

“From the perspective of those on the inside”, the authors examine some of the recent changes in modern converged multimedia newsrooms and the ways

journalists are reacting to them. They concluded that that while multimedia news is becoming well established, the multimedia journalist has been slow to arrive. This study mainly discusses the individual journalists' practices such as gathering information, writing and publishing rather than the communicative collaboration between journalists in each newsroom. Also, the scope of the research, with interviews with an average of 5 journalists from each news house, is indeed "a modest attempt" as the authors claim. Therefore, even though this study helps inform my research design, its theoretical role remains minor.

Also interested in newsroom convergence, Dupagne and Garrison (2006) find that journalists view media convergence and its impact in the newsroom primarily as a tool to produce either combined or additional newsgathering resources. The interviewed journalists feel that they now concentrate more on multimedia storytelling and have increased their level of knowledge of the other two platforms. In terms of training, respondents stress the importance of strong fundamentals, such as writing, reporting, and *communication* skills, but also emphasize the importance of cross-media adaptability for individuals preparing for careers in convergent newsrooms.

In another attempt to look at newsroom convergence from a professional perspective, Aviles and Meier, et al. (2009) developed a convergence matrix for analysis and comparison of integrated newsrooms. According to the authors, the matrix related to "four essential areas of development in a media convergence process: project scope, newsroom management, journalistic practices, work organization". Based on this matrix, the authors draw three models of newsroom convergence: full integration, cross-media and co-ordination of isolated platforms. However, using six convergent media houses in Austria, Germany and Spain as case studies, the authors concluded that "none of these models exist, of course, in their "pure form", and no media company analysed is absolutely dedicated to full integration, cross-media collaboration or isolated newsrooms. Most convergence experiences can be attributed to one or other model as an idea, strategy or even philosophy". Still, the authors hope their matrix/models will be helpful to restructure strategic considerations and to develop convergence concepts.

Despite not finding any news organisation that totally fits one of their models, the authors find out some interesting data. They believe that:

“from the journalistic perspective, convergence and newsroom integration generate fundamental changes in news production and organization. Digital systems allow journalists to share data (audio, video and text) in order to elaborate content for the various platforms with increasing versatility. At integrated newsrooms, multi-skilled journalists produce news for at least two platforms: print, radio, television, mobile devices and the Internet. This varied work for several platforms may lead to more creative journalistic story-telling but also to a growing pressure on editors and reporters.”

Like Saltzis and Dickinson (2008), Aviles, Meier, et al (2009) find out that even though the levels of integration/convergence in their case studies are different, the multi-skills of journalists are not generally high.

Despite the geographical spreading, Aviles, Meier, et al (2009) research was based on only two-day period observation which also including time for interviews with (“at least”) two interviews with each newsroom. I do not oppose to the study’s results, but am concerned whether the generated data were sufficient. Also, it was not clear from the article how the author came up with the matrix. Still, the matrix helps to some extent with my research design as a general reference and as a confirmation of the need to do a study like mine. In return, my research will hopefully bring new elements to help particularize and evaluate these models of newsroom convergence as the authors suggest.

Quinn (2005) believes that media managers adopt convergence with two main goals in mind: improving the quality of journalism and tightening production costs. From management's point of view, the most frequent strategies are collaboration and partnership among the different media. Thus, managers have used convergence in order to achieve more efficient multiplatform news production and improve performance.

Meier (2007) looked at modern newsroom models in Central European countries, especially Austria, Germany and Switzerland and found that editorial job divisions, routines and work practices in newspaper and news agency newsrooms have been revolutionized by the management’s bridging traditional barriers between departments and introducing more flexible structures. Large and open newsrooms, for example, are now becoming increasingly popular. The author suggests that modernized newsrooms can increase speed and journalistic quality. At the same time building structure and space play an important role in the

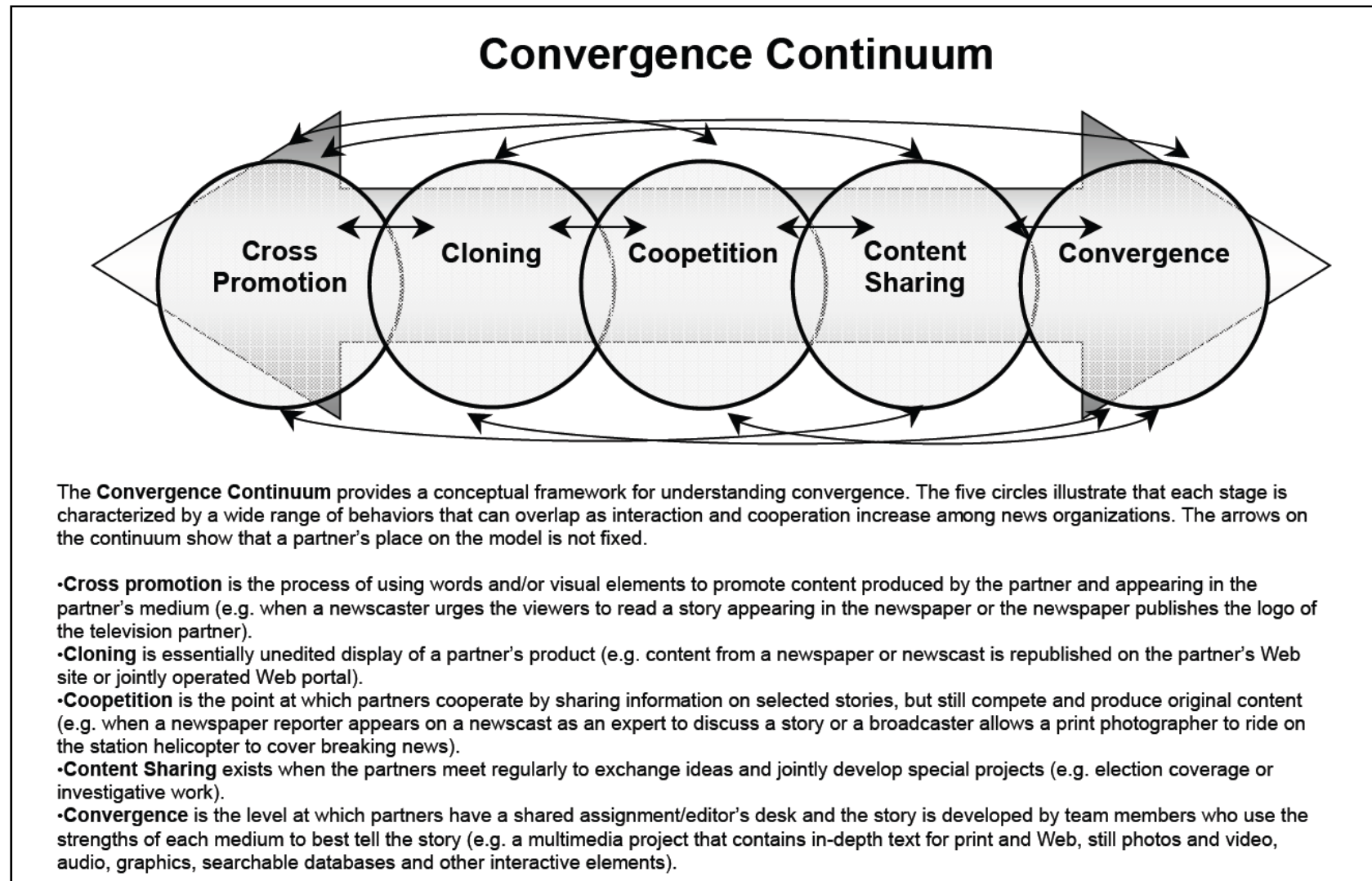
innovations process of a newsroom. There are significant correlations between satisfaction with the work site and the assessment of rising quality.

Dailey, Demo et al. (2003) examine the newsroom convergence's nature on the assumption of evolving degrees of interaction and co-operation among cross-media partners and whether the media are owned by common or separate companies. In order to fill "a void in the research on convergence and for extending research into gatekeeping and diffusion of innovation" (p. 150), these authors establish a conceptual framework - "the Convergence Continuum Model" (figure 10 below) - with operational definitions of the various levels in that model. Within this framework, news convergence is defined as "a series of behaviour-based activities illustrating the interaction and co-operation levels of staff members at newspapers, television stations and Web organizations with news partnership" (p.150). The authors hope the dynamic continuum's components will provide media professionals with a touchstone as they develop cross-media alliances.

Each of the Convergence Continuum Model's levels comprises a series of tasks and processes, most of which are of communication nature – interacting, sharing information and exchanging ideas. It can be interpreted from this model that it measures the level of convergence by examining merely whether or not the interaction, sharing and exchanging take place, not how they take place.

**FIGURE 3: Convergence Continuum**

Source: (Dailey, Demo et al. 2003)



### ***3.3. The limits of news production, media convergence and media management research***

The *newsroom and news production* studies are often criticized for their single-angle approach, either ‘political-economy’, ‘phenomenology and ethnomethodology’ (examining the role of news media in the social life) or ‘cultural practices’ (Schudson 1989). Gaye Tuchman (2002) believes that the three traditions should be combined to account for current development of news media. In my view, even combining all the three traditions is not enough and taking into account theories from other fields such as organizational behavior will help, as this study confirms.

Unlike other forms of production, media production is a cultural process and therefore literature on media production is more about culture and politics than about efficiency or strategy implementation.

As seen from the discussion above, news production and newsroom sociologists such as Tuchman (1978; 2002) and Schlesinger (1987), use the knowledge of newsroom operation to understand the products, i.e. the ideological nature of news, not the process itself and whether the process is efficient or not. They do not explicitly try to study how a management strategy changes (or fails to change) the organisational culture and communication processes of journalists in a newsroom. For that purpose, when analysing communication practices and other newsroom routines, they look at “what is said or done”, not “how it is said or done”. They focus on what takes place in the newsroom, what is discussed or what kind of conversations takes place in the newsrooms and the possible consequences of that to the final journalistic products while this study focuses on how it is discussed or in other words, how the conversations are carried out and the possible consequences of that to the production itself.

As such, the researchers study organizational and professional culture and also production routines, but their purpose is to explain the political/ideological content of the news. They do not try to explain newsroom communication and routines in its relationship to practical problems in production. Nor do they try to identify ways to improve it.

Meanwhile, my research looks at the problem the other way round. As a practicing journalist I already know the problems with the content, which are practical not political or ideological – i.e. whether the content gets collected or not, and that different types of newspapers suffer this problem to different degrees. What I would like to understand and explain is what causes the different levels of effective communication in different newsrooms which appears to produce these practical problems? What are other factors that affect the production process? And are there any lessons which could be learned to help improve communication and, thus, newsroom efficiency?

Therefore, while the idea of organizational culture is a useful way of studying how the strategy (e.g. of the BBC) gets translated (often without being explicit) into newsroom processes, it is not sufficient to examine the complex picture of the factors affecting the strategy/change management in the newsroom.

Regarding *convergence*, many media practitioners and managers as well as most researchers describe it as an indispensable trend or strategy in the media industry. But even the newswork and convergence studies are primarily about the academics interest of journalism and politics rather than the journalist's interest in efficiency.

A big part of the convergence literature claims that the process is reshaping journalistic practices and the fundamental relationships between journalists, their sources and their audiences (Boczkowski 2004; Lawson-Borders 2006). Further, it is argued, cross-media partnerships force individual journalists to re-examine cultural and organizational differences as they select stories, produce content across platforms, and establish new routines (Dailey, Demo et al. 2003). One of the aims of convergence is to “foster internal communication” (Aviles, Meier et al. 2009), which is needed to compensate for job cuts, or enhance interaction and co-operation among media partners.

However, the media organizational cultures and the internal relationship, which in essence has communication as a core, among journalists themselves are somehow neglected in this body of literature nor does communication appear to have been an indicator for media managers to evaluate their convergence processes and

results. Nor it is of interest to convergence researchers. No research has been found about the communication status before, during and after convergence, how journalists make sense of it, and whether or not newsrooms have specific communication strategies or only take for granted that efficient communication will automatically come with physical convergence which is obtained through establishing a centralized information system or moving people from different buildings/floors to place them next to each other as many cases show.

Regarding *media management*, as mentioned earlier, despite the fact that “the core task of media management is to build a bridge between the general theoretical disciplines of management and the specificities of the media industry” (Kueng 2008:2), much research has been done from economic-financial point of view and focuses on media strategies on industrial level.

Much fewer data about the media’s everyday operational practices, as well as “soft” perspectives of management such as human resource, leadership, culture, creativity, etc. have been generated even though these issues have recently caught the interest of some researchers, who draw mostly on general management literature as theoretical frameworks.

Albarran (2006) believes that media management today is ‘a global phenomenon, and research and inquiry in the field of media management crosses interdisciplinary lines, theoretical domains, and political systems.’ He provides a brief review of the major historical contributions to general management theory such as Scientific Management, Administrative management, Bureaucratic management, The Hawthorne Experiments, The Hierarchy of Needs, Hygiene and Motivator Factors, Theory X and Theory Y, Theory Z, etc. Then he discusses more contemporary approaches to management namely management effectiveness, leadership, systems theory, total quality management, strategic management. Albarran argues that all the literature forms our knowledge of trends and patterns in media management research. He concludes:

1. “The literature on media management is limited in terms of both its practical and theoretical contribution to the field. Much of the early work (prior the 1990s) is descriptive in nature, but helps provide a good orientation and foundation to the field.



2. There is no consensus among scholars on how to approach the study of management. Most media management is targeted toward the role of the editor/publisher in the newspaper industry or the general manager in the broadcast/cable industries. Consciously or not, researchers have ignored other levels of management (e.g. supervisory, middle management) in media operations.
3. Methodologies employed in studying media management rely almost exclusively on personal interviews, surveys, or secondary research sources. However, research conducted since the mid-1990s tends to be more sophisticated in that it is theoretically driven and analytically based.
4. The field is ripe for exploring new avenues of research, expanding the use of different methodologies, and developing new theoretical approaches.” (p16)

In another attempt to survey the research body on media management, Mierzejewska and Hollifield (2006) discuss different theories that inform media management research such as strategic management theories, structural theories, transnational media management theories, organizational culture theories, theories on technology, innovation and creativity, economic theory, leadership theory, etc. The authors claim that the most glaring omission in the field is in research on media organizational leadership and employee motivation. They believe this gap must be addressed because of “the rapid changes overtaking the media industry and the industry’s heavy reliance on human capital in the creative processes of production.”

The literature gap seen by Hollifield has been somewhat filled by the recent intensive work of Lucy Keung who tries to combine different “soft” elements of media management (2007a; 2007b; 2008). This will be discussed later as most management theories that this author employs are from general management and organizational behaviour literature.

### ***3.4. The need for studying newsroom efficiency***

“Over the last forty years media analysts have developed a number of theories which attempt to explain the inner workings of the news operation. Some of these models are drawn from field work and direct observation of what actually happens in the newsroom; others are more theoretical and are based on the application of sociological or linguistic theory to news analysis.”

“Neither approach has won much attention or favour from professional journalists” because “theoretical models do not reflect real life and are largely irrelevant to the practicalities of the news-gathering operation.” Venables (1993:x)

Why is it the case? I believe it is because media scholars have not addressed the biggest concern of the media practitioners. Even back in the 1970s the journalists’ biggest concern was efficiency (Schlesinger 1987). This researcher noted that the journalists said they expected his research would be about how to improve efficiency in the newsrooms.

Later scholars such as McQuail (1992); Cavallin (2000); Cuilenburg (2000); Golding (2000); Lacy (Lacy 2000); Picard (2000a; 2000b), have also noted that one of the newsroom managers’ main concerns is how to measure media quality and performance in order to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the production. However, this topic has still been under-examined and no inquiry into communication inside newsrooms and how it affects the news production as well as the newsrooms’ external strategies has been found.

As such, interestingly, there is a striking similarity in the concerns raised by journalists in different news organisations in different countries despite their totally different cultural, economic and political situations.

The lack of interest by media academics in the journalists’, or in other word, industry’s, concerns, i.e. editors’ behaviours and issue of efficiency, is surprising to me. I believe the gap needs to be addressed. Literature on organisational management and communication, therefore, is helpful to shed some light into this issue of efficiency.

For this reason the next section turns to the general management literature and organizational communication to develop the framework for studying newsroom practices and newsroom communication as well as their relationship to efficiency. This involves reviewing two separate literatures since although many organizational behaviour theorists acknowledge the role of communication, they focus on organizational structure, environment, leadership and individual ability. Communication has never been a focus. Instead organizational communication, (discussed below) has developed itself into a separate research field which tends to focus more on communicative elements and somewhat ignore the

“environment” factors of structure, leadership etc. The theoretical framework of this research needs to incorporate both these elements.

### 3.5. Organisational behavior

Organisational behaviour “is the study and application of knowledge about how people – as individuals and as groups – act within organisations. It strives to identify ways in which people can act more effectively” (Newstrom and Davis 1993:4). These authors argue that the key elements in organisational behaviour are people, structure, technology, and the environment in which the organisation operates (p5).

Newstrom and Davis cite the four models of organisational behaviour which were originally published in Davis (1967):

**Table 1: Four models of organisational behavior (Source: Newstrom and Davis 1993)**

	<b>Autocratic</b>	<b>Custodial</b>	<b>Supportive</b>	<b>Collegial</b>
<b>Basic of model</b>	Power	Economic resources	Leadership	Partnership
<b>Managerial orientation</b>	Authority	Money	Support	Teamwork
<b>Employee orientation</b>	Obedience	Security and benefits	Job performance	Responsible behavior
<b>Employee psychological result</b>	Dependence on boss	Dependence on organisation	Participation	Self-discipline
<b>Employee needs met</b>	Subsistence	Security	Status and recognition	Self-actualisation
<b>Performance result</b>	Minimum	Passive cooperation	Awakened drives	Moderate enthusiasm

The authors conclusions are: the models are evolving; the models are related to human needs; trend toward the supportive and collegial models; the contingent use of all models; and there is “a need for managers not only to identify their current behavioural model, but must keep it flexible and current”. The conclusions imply that leadership and organisational culture/behaviour are inter-dependent factors.

### ***3.6. Organisational structure and culture***

Newstrom and Davis (1993) acknowledge the importance of organisation culture by claiming that “inside the organisation lies a powerful force for determining individual and group behaviour” (p58). They describe that organisational culture is the set of assumptions, beliefs, values, and norms that is shared among its members and that “it [culture] represents a key element of the work environment in which employees perform their jobs” (p.58).

Newstrom and Davis (1993:58) believe that organisational culture is present and pervasive and “Like the air in a room, it surrounds and affects everything that happens in an organisation. Because it is a dynamic systems concept, culture is also affected by almost everything that occurs within an organisation”.

According to these authors, organisational cultures are important to a firm’s success for several reasons:

- “They give an organisational identity to employees”;
- “They are an important source of stability and continuity to the organisation, which provides a sense of security to its members”;
- “Knowledge of one’s organisational culture helps newer employees interpret what goes on inside of it, by providing an important context for events that would otherwise seem confusing.”
- “They help stimulate employee enthusiasm for their tasks. Cultures attract attention, convey a vision, and typically honor high-producing and creative individuals. By recognising and rewarding these persons, organisational cultures are identifying them as role models to emulate.” (p.58,59)

The third point implies that the manager/leader’s role lies in communicating the culture to new employees or “proposed” culture to the existing employees.

Similarly, Robbins and Judge (2008:250) believe that culture:

- “Enhances the stability of the social system. It is the social glue that helps hold the organisation together by providing appropriate standards for what employees should say and do”

- “Serves as a sense-making and control mechanism that guides and shapes the attitudes and behaviour of employees”.

Newstrom and Davis (1993:59) believe that cultures can be categorised as ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ largely on the degree of their impact on employee behaviour and how widely this occurs. Characteristics of culture are summarised as follows:

- Distinctive
- Stable
- Implicit
- Symbolic
- Integrated
- Accepted
- A reflection of top management
- Of varying strength

It is worth noting that this view implies that managers and leaders create, and hence, can change culture.

Based on work by O'Reilly, Chatman et al (1991) and Chatman and Jehn (1994), Robbins and Judge (2008:248) suggests that seven primary characteristics, in aggregate, capture the essence of an organisation's culture:

1. “Innovation and risk taking: the degree to which employees are encouraged to be innovative and take risks.”
2. “Attention to detail: the degree to which employees are expected to exhibit precision, analysis, and attention to detail”
3. “Outcome orientation: the degree to which management focuses on results or outcomes rather than on the techniques and processes used to achieve those outcomes.”
4. “People orientation: the degree to which management decisions take into consideration the effect of outcomes on people within the organisation.”
5. “Team orientation: the degree to which work activities are organised around teams rather than individuals.”

6. “Aggressiveness: The degree to which people are aggressive and competitive rather than easygoing”.
7. “Stability: The degree to which organisational activities emphasise maintaining the status quo in contrast to growth”. (p248)

Schein (2004: 199) believes that “categorising organisational culture simplifies thinking and helps sorting out the complexities we must deal with when confronting organisational realities”.

- Schein (2004: 191) cites Etzioni (1975) who believes there are basically three types of organisations: i) coercive organisations, in which the individual is essentially captive for physical or economic reasons and must, therefore, obey whatever rules are imposed by the authorities; ii) utilitarian organisations, in which the individual abides by whatever rules are essential however the group often develops countercultural norms and rules to protect itself; iii) normative organisations, in which the individual contributes his or her commitment because the goals of the organisation are basically the same as the individual’s goals. Schein concludes:

“The arguments that managers get into about the ‘correct’ level of participation and use of authority usually reflect the different assumptions they are making about the nature of the subordinates they are dealing with. Looking at participation and involvement as a matter of cultural assumptions makes clear that the debate about whether leaders should be more autocratic or participative is ultimately highly coloured by the assumptions of a particular group in a particular context. The search for the universally correct leadership style is doomed to failure because of cultural variation by country, by industry, by occupation, and by the particular history of a given organisation.” (p193).

Wilkins (1989), who believes that culture consists of shared vision, motivational faith and distinctive skills and that building culture or ‘corporate character’ is possible by emphasizing programs dealing with each of the above-mentioned component.

According to Cameron and Quinn (1999) an internally focused flexible organisation is thought of as a clan, whereas an internally focused stable organisation is thought of as a hierarchy. An externally focused flexible organisation is called an adhocracy, and an externally focused stable organisation is thought of as a market (cited in Schein 2004: 194, 195).

Citing his own previous work, Schein (2004: 197-199) claims that any organisation has three types of sub-cultures: operator culture (formed by the people who directly do the tasks of the organisation), engineering culture (formed by 'engineers' - those whose job is to design the work products and processes and who are more concerned about innovation, improvement, and redesign), executive culture (formed by the organisation's leaders or managers "whose fundamental task is to ensure the organisation's survival and effectiveness as well as to integrate or at least align the other two cultures to maximize long-run effectiveness") (p.197). The sub-cultures can be competing/conflicting to each other or/and constructively aligned.

Schein claims that "when one of the subcultures becomes too dominant, the organisation will not survive" (p199). Therefore, the issue for any organisation as a whole or for leaders is "how to align the goals of the three subcultures: focusing on doing the job, remaining innovative to deal with changes in the environment, and staying economically healthy" (p.199).

Charles Handy (1987; cited in Schabracq 2007), however, divides culture into 4 categories: bureaucracies, social clubs, networks, and gatherings of soloists.

Schabracq (2007) criticises Handy's models as a bit ideal because most organisations are of a mixed nature. However, Schabracq also believes that they can be helpful because they give change agents some indications of what they can and even should do, what they had better not do, as well as give leads about the kinds of organisation where they can be more or less productive and successful.

Schabracq claims that when one of the four models gets into trouble, it often can be helped by installing some of the characteristics of the other types.

Robbins and Judge (2008: 259) also think it is not impossible to change culture even though it is difficult because culture develops over many years and is rooted in deeply held values to which employees are strongly committed. The authors

find evidence that cultural change is most likely to be possible when most or all of the following conditions exist: 1) a dramatic crisis exists or is created, 2) turnover in leadership, 3) young and small organisation, 4) weak culture.

Most cultures evolve directly from top management, who can have a powerful influence on their employees by what they say and do (Newstrom and Davis 1993; Robbins and Judge 2008).

### ***3.7. Leadership***

“Researchers usually define leadership according to their individual perspectives and the aspects of the phenomenon of most interest to them.” (Yukl 1998: 2)

Reviewing leadership studies, Yukl (1998: 3) quotes:

Leadership is “the behavior of an individual ... directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal.” (Hemphill & Coons. 1957, p7)

Leadership is ‘the influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with the routine directives of the organization.” (Katz & Kahn. 1978. p528)

Leadership is exercised when persons... mobilize... institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers.” (Burns, 19’78.p.t8)

“Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others.” (Smircich & Morgan. 1982, p.258)

Leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an organized group toward goal achievement.” (Rauch & Behling, 1984, p4b)

Leadership is about articulating visions, embodying values, and creating the environment within which things can be accomplished.” (Richards & Engle, 1986, p206)

“Leadership is a process of giving purpose (meaningful direction) to collective effort, and causing willing effort to be expended to achieve purpose.” (Jacobs & Jaques. 1990, 281)



Leadership is the ability to step outside the culture . . . to start evolutionary change processes that are more adaptive.” (Schein. 1992, p.2)

Leadership is the process of making sense of what people are doing together so that people will understand and be committed.” (Drath & Palus, 1994, p.4)

Leadership is ‘the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization (House et al., 1999. p184)

Yukl (2006: 3) sees that most of the definitions assume that “it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization”. Beside that the definitions appear to have “little else in common”.

According to Yukl (2006), leaders can influence:

- The interpretation of external events by members
- The choice of objectives and strategies to pursue
- The motivation of members to achieve the objectives
- The mutual trust and cooperation of members
- The organization and coordination of work activities
- The allocation of resources to activities and objectives
- The development of member skills and confidence
- The learning and sharing of new knowledge by members
- The enlistment of support and cooperation from outsiders
- The design of formal structure, programs, and systems
- The shared beliefs and values of members

Relating to theories of culture discussed above, it is claimable that leadership can influence culture. Based on Schein (Schein 1992), Yukl (2006) shows that leaders shape culture with:

- Primary Mechanisms
  - What things are attended to by the leader
  - Ways of reacting to crises
  - Role modeling

- Criteria for allocating rewards
- Criteria for selection and dismissal
- Secondary Mechanisms
  - Design of management systems and procedures
  - Design of organization structure
  - Design of facilities
  - Stories, legends, and myths
  - Formal statements

Having watched hundreds of companies try to remake themselves into significantly better competitors, Kotter (2006: 3-4) claims that even though the efforts have gone under many banners: total quality management, reengineering, right sizing, restructuring, cultural change, and turnaround, the basic goal has been the same: to make fundamental changes in how business is conducted in order to help cope with a new, more challenging market environment.

According to Kotter (2006: 4):

“Change, by definition, requires creating a new system, which in turn always demands leadership. Phase one in a renewal process typically goes nowhere until enough real leaders are promoted or hired into senior-level jobs.”

Kotter also believes a paralysed senior management often comes from having too many managers and not enough leaders. Management’s job is to “minimise risk and to keep the current system operating”. “Transformation often begin, and begin well, when an organisation has a new head who is a good leader and who sees the need for a major change.” (p.4-5)

Adopting the theory of the ‘more powerful person’, which claims that more powerful people almost automatically draw attention and as a result we tend to adopt their attitudes and consequently we tend to look at the world from their perspectives (see Chance and Larsen 1976), Schabracq (2007) believes that as leaders are by definition powerful, they draw much attention and as a result, their followers tend to take over their attitudes and assumptions without question. Leaders then become by definition strong role models who can use their attitudes

to influence their followers' motivation and behaviour. However, the downside of this is that a leader who displays inadequate attitudes can have a devastating effect on his employees' motivation and behaviour.

Schabracq goes on saying that energy and clear intent are part of charismatic leadership, energizing and steering followers. In an organisation, this implies a direct confrontation with the members. Charismatic leadership then represents a classic, up-front approach to leadership.

Explaining the supportive model (see the table above), Newstrom and Davis (1993: 34-35) say:

“Through leadership, management *provides a climate* to help employees grow and accomplish in the interests of the organisation the things of which they are capable. The leader assumes that workers are not by nature passive and resistant to organisational needs but that they are made so by an inadequately supportive climate at work. They will take responsibility, develop a drive to contribute, and improve themselves if management will give them a chance.

Since management supports employees in their work, the psychological result is a feeling of participation and task involvement in the organisation. They may say “we” instead of “they” when referring to their organisation. They are more strongly motivated than by earlier models because their status and recognition needs are better met.

... The manager's role is one of helping employers solve their problems and accomplish their work.” (p.34-35)

How can leaders provide such a climate? How to consciously create and manage cultures? One suggestion by Newstrom and Davis (1993) is to communicate the cultures to employees (p61). The authors go on to provide some helpful advice on different methods of formal and informal communication: transmitting executive visions of the firm's future, corporate philosophy statements, and codes of ethical conduct; publicly recognising heroes and heroines, retelling historical success stories, allowing myths to become exaggerated without ‘popping the hot-air balloon’, etc.

However, most of the advice seems to fit well with new employees rather than existing ones who have obviously been long exposed to the culture and, thus, are much more difficult to accept changes to the established culture.

Newstrom and Davis (1993: 63) also conclude that an organisation's participants learn about its culture through the process of socialisation and influence it through individualisation. Understanding this will help find out how leadership can influence the culture.

Kotter (2006: 15-16) has concluded that the most frequent errors leaders of change often make are:

- Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency
- Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition
- Lacking a vision
- Undercommunicating the vision
- Not removing obstacles to the new vision
- Not systematically planning for and creating short-term wins
- Declaring victory too soon
- And last but not least, not anchoring changes in the corporation's culture.

Kotter claims that change sticks when it seeps into the bloodstream of the corporate body and until new behaviours are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are subject to degradation as soon as the pressure for change is removed.

### ***3.8. Organisational and internal communication***

The review of the literature has shown that even though many organizational behaviour theorists acknowledge the role of communication, communication has never been a focus. Therefore to understand the specific role of communication in relation to organization strategies requires a review of a final area of literature.

As organizations often exchange messages containing a rich mixture of facts, ideas, opinions, and beliefs, often coloured by varying degrees of emotion in a

complex environment, Blundell acknowledges that communication is difficult, but he also believes effective communication does have its rewards. It helps organizations to achieve:

- “Satisfied repeat customers, rather than unhappy ex-customers;
- Well-motivated employees, rather an expensive industrial dispute;
- A positive reputation in the wider community, rather than an international boycott of its products;
- Innovative and creative strategies, rather than inefficiency, indecision and resistance to change”.(p2)

This is confirmed by many other communication and management/organisational theorists (e.g. Brunsson 1985; Brunsson and Olsen 1993; Burke 2002; Bloisi, Cook et al. 2003; Brooks 2003; Blundel 2004; Buchanan and Huczynski 2004; Quirke 2008, etc.)

Of the texts about organizational communication found Blundel’s (2004) provides both practical how-to guideline to improve communication and an overview and contrast of the research perspectives concerning organizational communication such as: modern, interpretive, critical and postmodern. Blundell acknowledges the advantages and disadvantages of these research trends as follows:

Modernist research tends to treat organizational communication practices as being readily accessible to researchers, revealing some predictable features that made them open to a degree of managerial intervention and control. Some researchers of this perspective include Thompson (1967), Pugh and Hickson (1976), etc.

Interpretive research owes much to the ethnographic tradition in anthropology and, thus, tends to be less concerned with general theory, but aims to reveal the complexity and richness of organizational communication. In general, researchers of this school attempt to conduct research in ways that do not impose the researchers’ interpretations of a situation onto the people they are observing (e.g. Pentland 1999).

Critical approach features broader political agenda. It has mainly been concerned with ways that communication channels are used to exercise power over

employees and other stakeholders (e.g. Habermas 1984; Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Knights and Willmott 2000).

Postmodernism is often presented as a challenge to the assumptions of modernism including the way it approaches research. In term of organizational communication, postmodernists have argued that contemporary trends, such as globalization and the rise of the internet have left people with “fragmented identities”, in the face of many competing discourses. This means it is not possible to make any objective, generalisable or unified statements about organizational communication. Instead, research tends to be directed at the deconstruction of particular communication practices.

While acknowledging the inter-relation between internal and external communication of an organization, for the purpose of this research, the literature review focuses more on internal communication.

According to Grundy (1997), beside the strategic decision itself, internal stakeholders are of most influence and importance as implementation is increasingly regarded as a central issue in strategic management. At the very core of managing strategic change is the issue of dealing with stakeholders both prior to, and during implementation.

“By getting across the right messages – in the right way – to your employees, your company can increase morale, productivity, performance, and workforce retention” (Holtz 2004).

Communication is a critical success factor in performance. Communication can help motivate and engage employees (Gilbert and Sanchez 2005). Through effective communication, organisations can encourage positive behaviour from employees (Hussey 2005).

Indeed, internal communication has proven to be able to help different organizations, for example:

- create competitive differentiation;
- develop new products and markets;
- reduce cost and streamline processes;
- gain people’s support for the business strategy; etc. (see Quirke 2008: 9)

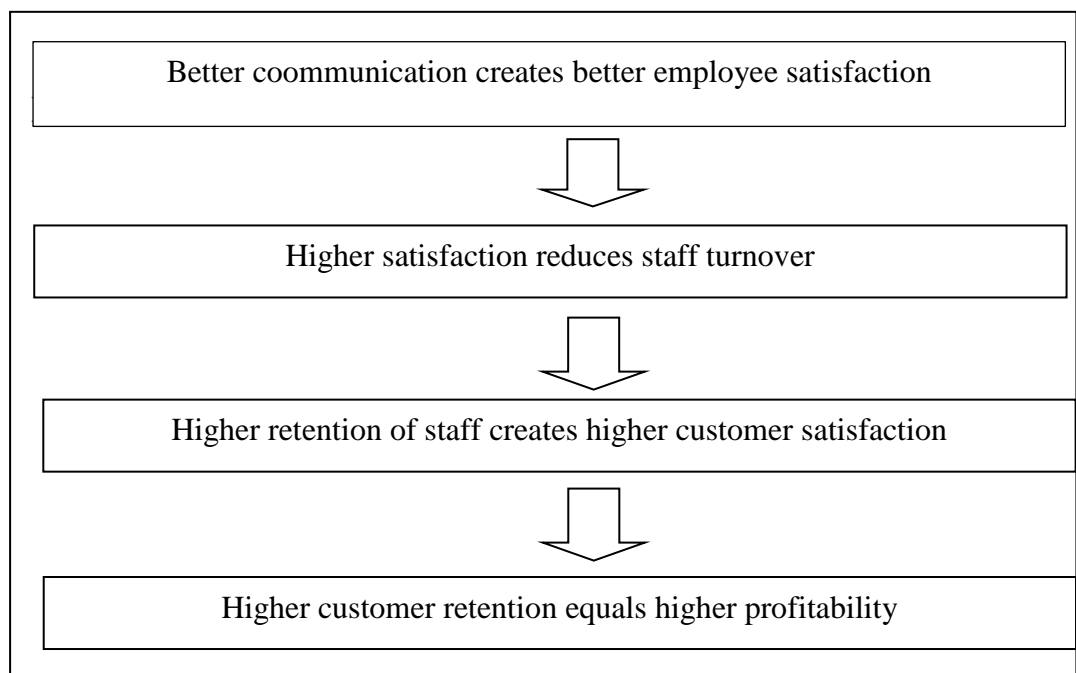
A KPMG longitudinal study of a cross-section of 135 manufacturers all over the world finds out that the most significant cost reductions are realised by improved cooperation and communication among departments. This approach leads to the reduction of waste through better process control, reduced engineering changes and improved product design (Quirke 2008: 38).

“It is by reaching the hearts and minds of employees and getting them involved that you gain surges of productivity and leaps of imagination” and “There is a strong link between the quality of internal communication and greater profitability. While greater customer loyalty has been shown to produce greater profits, it depends on employee loyalty and satisfaction.”

This confirms Reicheld (1996) who finds employee and customer loyalty are very closely related.

Quirke also finds evidences that on average, US companies lose 50 per cent of their customers every 5 years and 50 per cent of their employees every 4 years, but the most successful US companies hold on to their employees and customers much longer (p39).

Management consultancy Bain and Co. formulated the relationship as shown in the diagram below (***Relationship between communication and profitability***)



Source: (Hopton and Bain-and-Co. 1994; cited in Quirke 2008: 39):

Despite the fact that businesses spend time and billions of dollars in advertising and Public Relations campaigns to sell their products to customers while ignoring one of their most important audiences – employees, there has been interest from communication or Public Relations authors in internal communication (Corrado 1994; Scholes 1997; Greener 1999; Argenti and Forman 2002; Holtz 2004; Drake, Gulman et al. 2005, etc.). These authors all believe that motivated employees are important assets of any organisation and that it is possible for organisations to build employee loyalty by communicating to them. Most of their books are “how-to” in approach and, thus, are helpful guidelines for communicators and managers, etc. However, even though they are valuable references, they fail to provide insights into organisations and their communication practices as well as fail to reflect and explain the complex interactive relations between internal communication and other factors such as organisational culture, management styles, etc. Moreover, none of the above books cover media organisations.

In their books “Organizational Behavior” (2007) and “Essentials of organizational behavior” (2008) (Robbins and Judge claim: “No group or organization can exist without communication” (p.158). Therefore, they devote one chapter of each book to communication. In the chapter, the authors show that good communication is essential to the effectiveness of any group or organization. Citing Thomas and Schmidt (1976), they claim:

“Because individuals spend nearly 70 percent of their waking hours communicating – writing, reading, speaking, listening – it seems reasonable to conclude that one of the most inhibiting forces to successful group performance is a lack of effective communication. Indeed, research indicates that poor communication is probably the most frequently cited source of interpersonal conflict.” (Robbins and Judge 2008: 158).

Robbins and Judge argue that communication must include both the transference and the understanding of meaning. Like Scott and Mitchell (1976), they believe communication serves four major functions within a group or organization: control, motivation, emotional expression, and information:

1. “Control. Communication acts to control member behavior in several ways. Organisations have authority hierarchies and formal guidelines that employees are required to follow. When employees are required to first communicate any job-related grievances to their immediate bosses, to follow their job descriptions,



or to comply with company policies, communication is performing a control function. But informal communication also controls behavior. When work groups tease or harass a member who produces too much (or makes the rest of the group look bad), they are informally communicating with, and controlling, the member's behavior.

2. Motivation. Relating back to their review of goal-setting and reinforcement theories (in a previous chapter of the same book), the authors conclude that "communication fosters motivation by clarifying to employees what is to be done, how well they are doing, and what can be done to improve performance if it's subpar... The formation of specific goals, feedback on progress toward the goals, and reinforcement of desired behavior all stimulate motivation and require communication.
3. Emotional expression. "For many employees, their work group is a primary source for social interaction. The communication that takes place within the group is a fundamental mechanism by which members show their frustrations and feelings of satisfaction. Communication, therefore, provides a release for the emotional expression of feelings and for fulfillment of social needs.
4. Information. Communication facilitates decision making. It provides the information that individuals and groups need to make decisions by transmitting the data to identify and evaluate alternative choices."(p.159)

Robbins and Judge believe that all the four functions are important and none should be considered more important than the others because "for groups to perform effectively, they need to maintain some form of control over members, stimulate members to perform, provide a means for emotional expression, and make decision choices."(p.159) The authors conclude: "communication plays a significant role in determining the level of employee motivation" (p.174). Robbins and Judge (2008: 174) also suggest that employers communicate realistic role expectations to new recruits as research shows that organisations which do this have 29 per cent higher turnover (on average) compared to those that do not have preview or only communicate positive information. It implies that managers should provide "honest and accurate" information about a job to applicants. Overall, although Robbins and Judge acknowledge the importance of effective communication in any organization, they mostly cite work by other authors and find relevant stories to illustrate their points rather than provide their own primary research data. Therefore, despite being a helpful reference or guideline for managers, their communication discourse, in my view, is rather shallow.

Moreover, the authors hardly survey media organizations which are the focus of my study.

Citing Schuler (1979); Walsh, Ashford et al. (1985); Hellweg and Phillips (1980); Bechky (2003); Reilly, Brown et al. (1981) and Phillips (1998); Robbins and Judge (2008) claim a close link between communication and employee satisfaction: “the less the uncertainty, the greater the satisfaction. Distortions, ambiguities, and incongruities in communications all increase uncertainty and, thus, have a negative impact on satisfaction” (p.174). The authors believe that “the less distortion occurring in communication, the more messages from management to employees will be received as they were intended” and that, in turn, “reduces ambiguities and clarify the group’s task” (p.174).

Research by Mercer Human Resource Consulting (see Gilbert and Sanchez 2005) shows that where upward communication flourishes, a significantly greater percentage of employees report they are highly committed to their organisation (85%), proud to work for their organisation (88%), satisfied with their jobs (89%) and would recommend their organisation's products and services to friends and family (72%). However, the research also finds that “UK organisations place far greater emphasis on downward communication about business and operational issues, as opposed to upward communication aimed at engaging employees and allowing them to voice their concerns and ideas.”

The communication effectiveness, in its turn, depends on many factors. Gilbert and Sanchez (2005) claim that the barriers to effective upward communication centre on three main issues - organisation culture, management skills and communication processes.

Blundell (2004) suggests considering challenges such as:

- Formal organization structures, reporting arrangements and procedures;
- Cultural diversity, across countries, organizations, departments, employees and other organizational stakeholders;
- Intense political, financial and time pressures, competing managerial priorities and demands;

which are surprisingly similar whether the organization is operating in the private, public or voluntary sector.

From the organizational perspective, Blundell identifies five well-established communication challenges: formal structure and managerial hierarchies, top management teams, organizational cultures, sub-cultures and unofficial communication channels (grapevine) – the first three, according to the author, are to some degree under the control of senior managers while the latter two are rather more elusive yet profoundly important influences on communication. Blundell discusses the organizational challenges in a detailed and concise manner (see Blundell 2004, chapter 7) especially the influence of organizational structure, which is well based on existing theories.

In *Making the Connections* Bill Quirke (2008) argues that ‘employees’ time and attention is a valuable commodity’, and discusses the constructive and destructive powers of communication as well as the results and consequences of either poor or overloaded communication. Then he offers suggestions/guidance to improve internal communication. Quirke acknowledges different factors relevant to internal communication: innovation, culture, leadership, channels of communication, etc especially during changes. He also provides a framework for developing change communication. However, like other above-mentioned authors, he fails to explain in a detailed and clear manner how the above factors interact with each other and with internal communication, nor he provides sufficient analyses of each factor. Moreover, Quirke’s book mainly discusses manufacturing companies or other businesses and offers no reference to the media industries which, as many researchers and practitioners believe, are very much different in terms of content, production, distribution and consumption. And again, it is noted that internal communication and change communication literature mostly concerns with UK, US and some other developed countries.

### ***3.9. Communication and motivation in change management***

“Organisations change all the time, each and every day. The change that occurs in organizations is, for the most part, unplanned and gradual. Planned organization change, especially on a large scale, affecting the entire system, is unusual... Revolutionary change – a major overhaul of the organization resulting

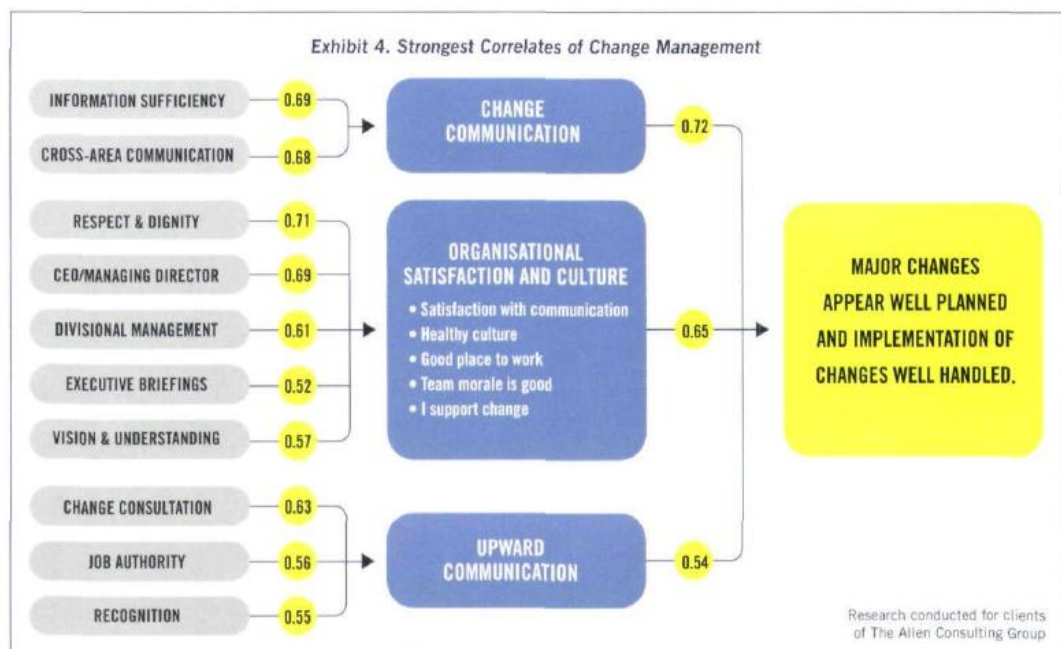
in a modified or entirely new mission, a change in strategy, leadership, and culture – is rare indeed. Most organization change is evolutionary.” (Burke 2002: 197)

There is evidence that many managers/leaders fail to attach enough importance to internal communication. Nine out of ten organizations fail fully to implement their strategy as they had planned, because only five per cent of all the staffs in the organizations involved understood the strategy<sup>12</sup> (Jones 2008: 2).

According to Gray (2004: 30), in 2003 The Allen Consulting Group carried out a survey of “a dozen of Australia's leading public and private sector organisations” employing “correlational modeling techniques” to find out “the key drivers of employee satisfaction with effective management of organisational change”.

The findings shows that “effectively managing major change requires attention to change communication, organisational satisfaction and culture and upward communication”(p.30):

**Figure 4: Exhibit: Strongest Correlates of Change Management**



**Source: Gray (2004: 30)**

<sup>12</sup> This research was conducted by Renaissance Worldwide in 1996. It is found that there are four main issues that prevent strategy to be executed: strategy not understood by employees, a lack of alignment in the organization to support the strategy, the misalignment of incentives and the lack of time executives spent discussing strategy.

The research shows the great importance of communication in change efforts. Within change communication, the aspects which are most important to effective communication and the management of major change include: information sufficiency, cross-area communication, CEO/managing director, respect and dignity, upward communication, change consultation, divisional management, executive briefings, and recognition.

In another attempt, Platen (2006: 240) claims:

“No significant interest has been taken in internal communication during organizational change by either organizational or communication researchers (Lewis and Seibold 1998; Eisenberg, Andrews et al. 1999). With a few important exceptions (Ericson 1998; Gustafsson 1998; Petersen 2000) there is little systematic and empirically based knowledge of how employees perceive changes and change-related communication.”

Platen finds out that change and change-related communication are perceived very differently by the members of an organization which makes joint action difficult and cause the failure of many change initiatives. Then she concludes:

- I) “Internal communication is clearly important, if the members of an organization are going to understand and participate in a change process. But it is nowhere near as important as one might think. Also in apparently ideal communication situations the participants are not satisfied, but this does not mean that information and communication are unimportant. The more inadequate internal communication is, the more evidence is the members’ search for meaning. As a result, symbols become prominent, stories and alternative interpretations gain ground. This complicates mutual understanding and organizational change”.
- II) “The most influential factor, by far determining how people make sense of change-related communication is the practical everyday reality that constitutes their frames of reference. The reluctance to consider, and act upon, how other individuals conceive of a situation leads to misdirected internal communication, lack of new understanding and unrealized change.”
- III) “Organisational identities, group membership, roles and status function as frames of reference when employees make sense of changes. But irrespective of whether the changes take place on an organisational, departmental or group level, personal identities are the most influential frames of reference for interpreting change” (p.247)

Like Platen, Nelson and Coxhead (1997) are also interested in the role of internal communication in organizational change. Agreeing with Holtham (1994); Bryan (1994); Smeltzer (1995); Kotter (1995); that internal communication is the shadow lurking behind everything attempted during a reengineering/culture change project and poor internal communication has been identified as one of the single most destructive elements in an environment undergoing change, Nelson and Coxhead claim that:

“nothing meaningful will be changed without first communicating the intent to change to those involved or affected. Internal communication is fundamental to creating change, and most people after thinking about it should be willing to acknowledge this. Less obvious is how to use communication to help create the kinds of change being sought, or increase the probability of implementation success for the re-engineering/culture change.

### ***3.10. A model of newsroom effectiveness***

Platen and Nelson and Coxhead's observation that internal communication receives insufficient attention in change attempts is also reflected in change management and media management theorists.

Drawing on different organizational theories, Burke (2002) presents the Burke-Litwin Causal Model of Performance and Change, as follows:

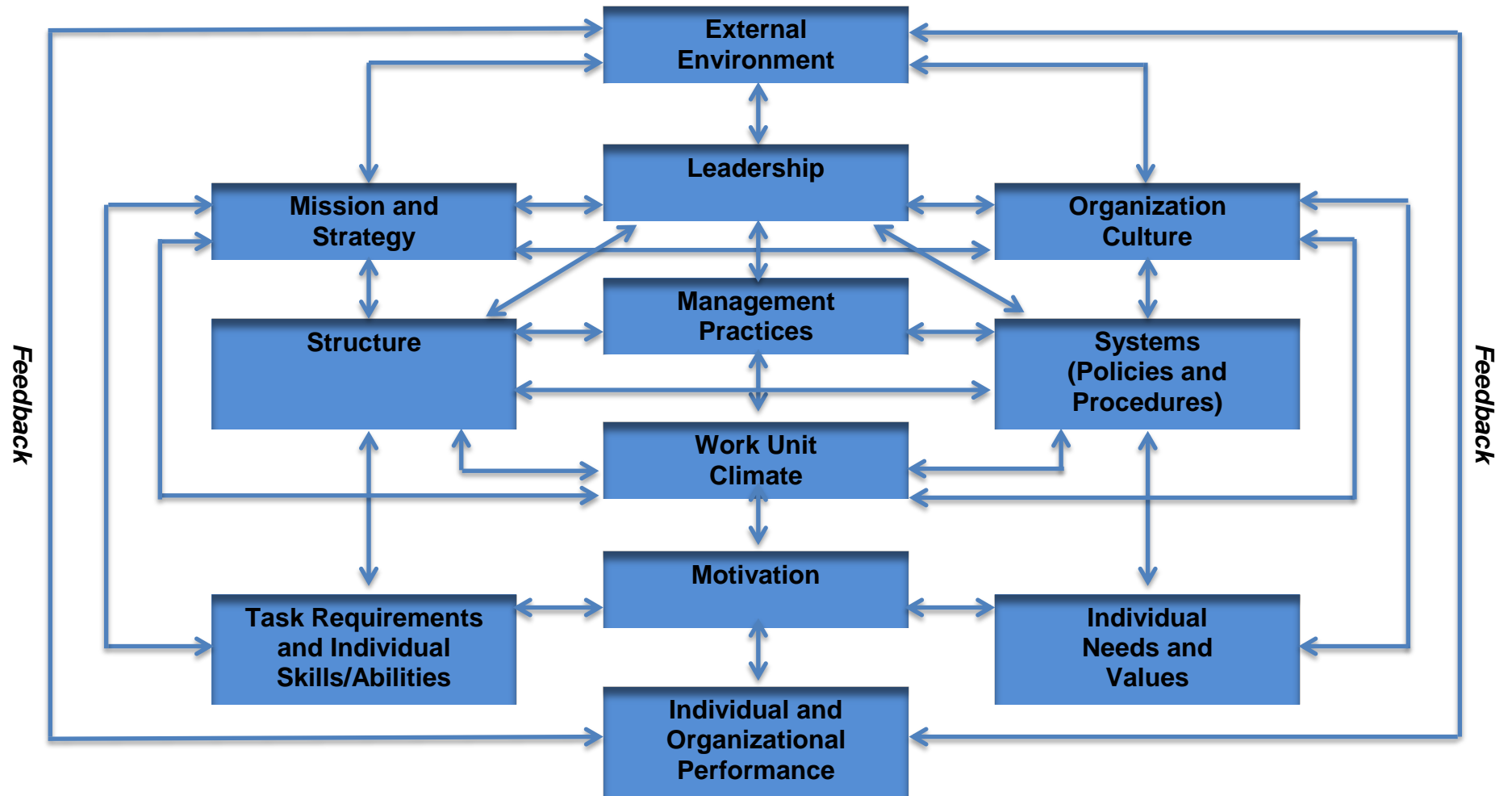


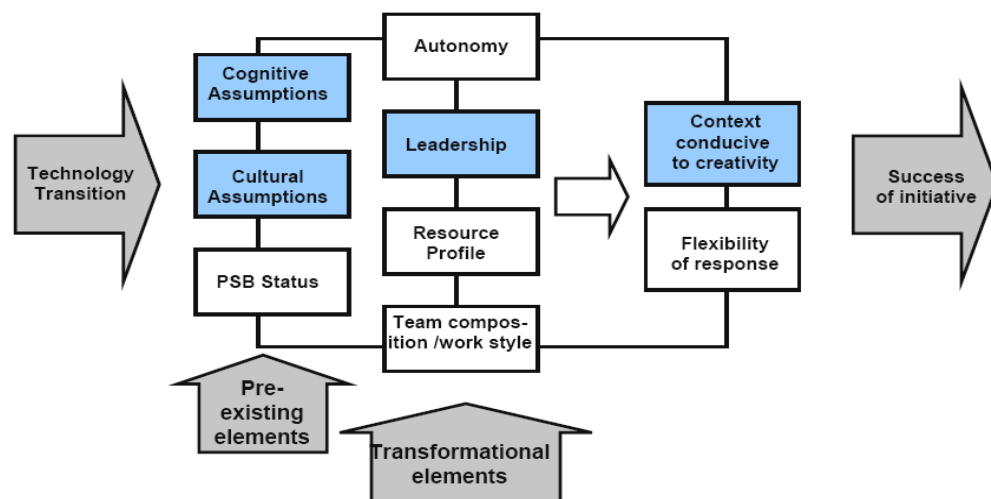
Figure 5: Burke-Litwin Causal Model of Performance and Change (Source: Burke (2002: 199))

Accept for communication, the model indeed has covered the important factors affecting an organisation's performance and change, which have been discussed in the literature review above: organizational culture and structure, management styles and practices, leadership, etc.

A similar model was developed by media management theorist Lucy Keung, who has a particular interest in “the impact of ‘soft’ factors such as culture, leadership and creativity beside ‘hard’ areas such as strategy and sustained superior performance, while studying the BBC News Online:

**Figure 6:**

**Architecture of organisational variables responsible for the success of BBC News Online**



**Source: Keung's (2007b: 15)**

Considering the importance of communication in organizational change management and performance, as discussed above, it is strange that this factor is not taken into account in the models.

Even in her later work *Strategic Management in the Media* (2008), where Kueng promotes a strategic approach and, in a persuasive, clear and concise manner, addresses different aspects of media management such as technologies; creativity and innovation; cognition, culture and strategy, organizational structure; and leadership – the issues that many mainstream theorists do not cover, communication is not addressed.

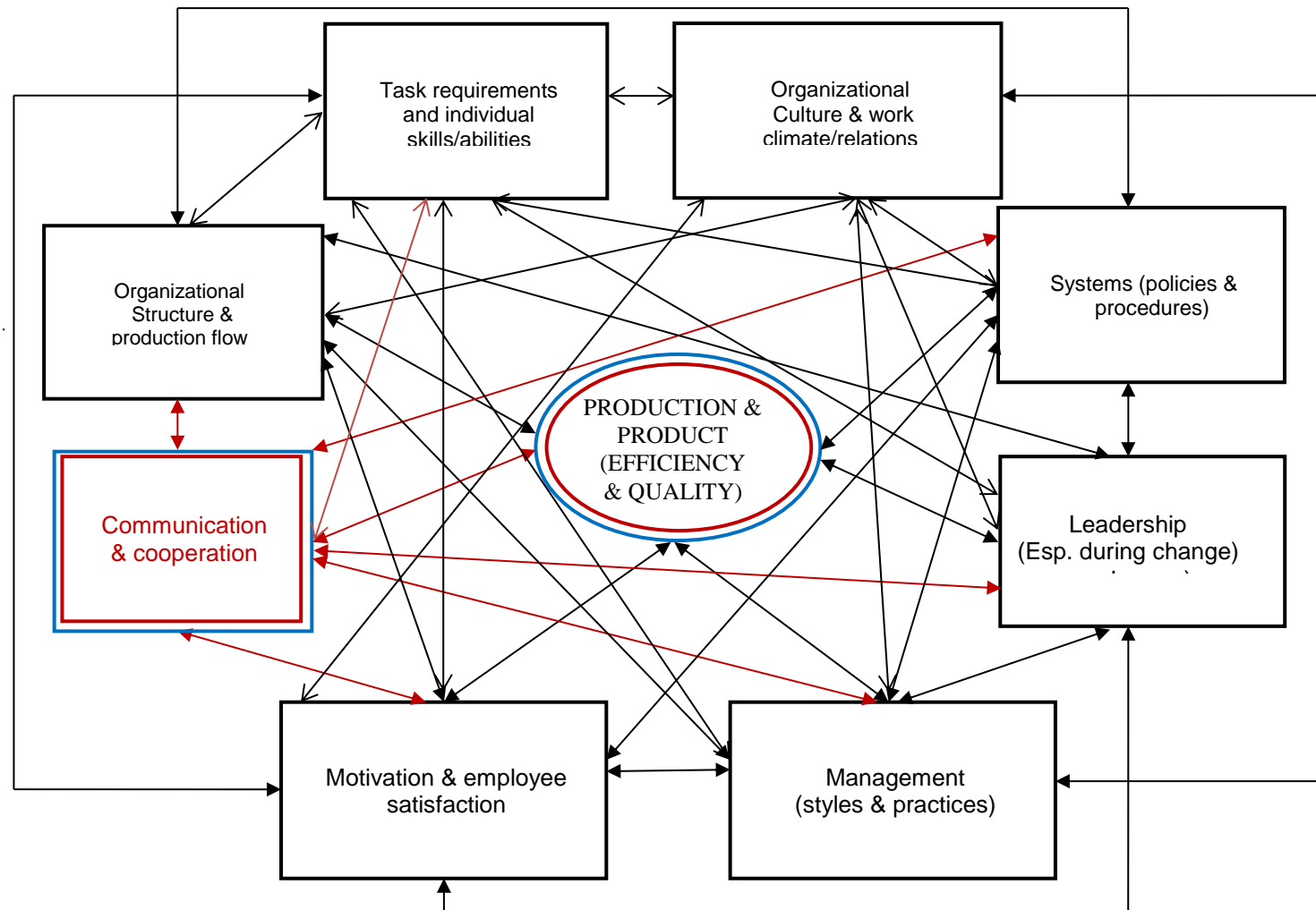


Therefore, in the search for the answer to my research questions about what factors affect Vietnamese newsrooms' strategy implementation and the role of internal communication in the process, I would suggest adapting Keung and Burke's models as followed (figure 2).

The model can be used to examine the current situation in a newsroom as well as by media managers to define the weak points that can be improved in order to gain efficiency or, in other words, to succeed in implementing newsroom strategies.

## NEWSROOM EFFECTIVENESS

FIGURE 2: INTERNAL FACTORS AFFECTING NEWSROOM EFFICIENCY



More details about the use of the model as a framework to answer this study's research questions are discussed in the next chapter Methodology. Before moving to that, let us look at Maestro concept, which is a strategy to improve newsroom efficiency that has been used to some extent successfully in some Vietnamese newsrooms including one of my two case studies.

### ***3.11. The Maestro Concept: a method to improve newsroom efficiency via communication and leadership***

#### *What is Maestro Concept?*

The *Maestro* model is, according to its deviser Buck Ryan, “a story planning process that brings together all the principal participants in a story package as early as possible to picture how the story will be presented to readers to answer their most pressing questions quickly.” (Ryan 2010) Its importance for this study is its emphasis on face-to-face communication.

*Maestro* was created in 1991 by Professor Buck Ryan from University of Kentucky whose starting point is the belief that “the best way to integrate words and visuals on a page is to have verbal and visual journalists working hand in hand toward a common goal. This does not happen naturally. There must be a method to ensure collaboration” Ryan (1999).

One of the first inspirations for the Maestro Concept was a study by Dr. Mario Garcia and Dr. Pegie Stark at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies entitled *Eyes on the News* (Garcia and Stark 1991). The study was based on EYE-TRAC results from readers in three cities reading mockups of their hometown newspapers. The research reveals that readers typically look at a photo or illustration first, then read the headline and other display (i.e. caption) type before reading the text.

The Maestro Concept was created to solve practical problems in newsrooms responding to audience behaviours and wants. Ryan believed journalists needed to “think like a reader” to be able to deliver information in the order readers are likely to digest it, – a new way to present stories. In seeking to do this, Ryan had identified some of the problems identified above in implementing new technology in newsrooms. Ryan believed that while the technology was radically different,

newsroom organization and operation stayed essentially the same. As a result, copy editors at newspapers introducing pagination were robbed of quality time to edit with precision.

Ryan wanted to find a better way than the traditional one to “mesh human beings with new technology to improve newspapers’ quality”. His critique of the assembly-line approach of traditional newsrooms is framed by the theories and philosophies of W. Edwards Deming’s, “father of the quality movement” (Ryan and O'Donnell 2001). Ryan applies W. Edwards Deming's (1986) management principles, to the creative environment of newsrooms, despite the fact that they were designed for the manufacturing setting. Deming’s theories aimed to eliminate rework, create opportunities for teamwork, build in quality at the beginning rather than to rely on inspection at the end. As such, the model highlights the advantage of teamwork, which is “sorely needed throughout the company. Teamwork requires one to compensate with his strength someone else’s weakness, for everyone to sharpen each other’s wits with questions” (W. Edwards Deming, cited by Ryan 1999; Ryan and O'Donnell 2001) . The aim is to introduce a project-based, teamwork-intensive approach to the process of newsroom management, organization and operation. The idea is that the focus on continuous improvement of newsroom processes leads to an increase in the newspaper’s quality over time.” (Ryan and O'Donnell 2001)<sup>13</sup>

Ryan argues (Ryan and O'Donnell 2001) that fundamentally, the Maestro Concept is a time-management technique designed to *maximize the amount of time for quality* for everyone involved in a story—reporter, assignment editor, copy editor, photographer, designer and graphics artist.

The term “maestro” refers to a re-imagined role of senior editors (or their delegates) in news production. Maestros aim to create more time for quality by managing the preliminary reporting stage. Without the intervention of the maestro, the reporter would have spent more time on reporting at the expense of quality thinking time for his partners in the story package. In this way, the author claims: “the Maestro Concept is a balancing act of time and talent.” He goes on:

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<sup>13</sup> Due to copyright issue, I could not buy this book to Sweden where I live. I contacted Professor Ryan for an electronic file of the book which does not have page numbers.

“Effective time management and teamwork are two important keys to quality, whether that quality involves reporting and writing, editing, photojournalism, layout and design or information graphics. Unfortunately, traditional approaches to story planning reinforce an assembly-line mentality that works against time for quality in all these areas and keep people and departments working in isolation. The Maestro Concept challenges these traditional approaches and asks journalists to think about how they might be more successful and have more fun if they go about their work in new ways.”

Like the Deming Cycle, Maestro is supposed to empower workers – “putting decision-making in the hands of those with the most expertise”.

The result is that news workers are empowered to “think like a reader”. Ryan claims maestro allows the writer, photographer, designer and editor to work in team to coordinate all these elements on a newspaper page for the maximum effect. This is because, in the maestro process, the readers’ questions, which are the process’ central point, serve several purposes. Ryan and O'Donnell (2001) says:

“First, they represent a checklist for additional reporting. Second, they create a framework for photo and illustration requests, page design and display type, such as headlines, captions, graphics headers and labels. Third, they provide the basis for a critique of the finished package. In a few minutes, the maestro and the reporter have focused the story, set the stage for other journalists’ work, provided a framework for presenting the story on a page, and created the basis on which the success of the story package will be judged after publication. This is what effective time management is all about.”

The Maestro Concept’s “battle cry” is “think like a reader” (where journalists have to anticipate readers’ questions, then answer them quickly on a page).

“The Maestro Concept is multidimensional, ranging from a new approach to generating story ideas to a constructive way to critique story packages after their publication. Teamwork, time management and managing change are essential to its success,” (Ryan and O'Donnell 2001)<sup>14</sup>.

The author’s summary of the method is as follows:

“The process begins with a great story idea, often generated in an idea group meeting. At newspapers, depending on how the concept is applied in different sections of the newsroom, maestros may run from editors to managing editors,

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<sup>14</sup> I could not obtain the hard copy of the book, therefore I asked the author to send me the electronic copy. Thus, I do not have the page numbers for the quotes.

section editors, assignment editors, designers and photo editors. Regardless of their positions, as maestros, they are dedicated to managing time for quality by everyone involved in a story. The time management begins with coaching writers through the reporting process. A “pre-maestro check” involves testing whether there has been enough reporting to ensure that a story is solid. Before any writing is done, the maestro convenes a maestro session to engage others who will be involved in the storytelling, such as copy editors, photographers, designers and graphics artists. At times library researchers will join maestro sessions.”

### *Maestro procedure*

The Maestro practice can be described as four steps:

#### **1. Idea Group Meetings**

This is a 4-circle creative process, like brainstorming, where all sorts of staff in a newsroom and even the audience can involve in news idea development. The circles include:

- *Inner circle:* Newsroom’s top decision makers, from top editor to section editors; star reporters; and others known for their creativity.
- *Second Circle:* Insiders outside the decision-making power loop such as copy editors, photographers, graphics artists, designers, newsroom librarians, editorial assistants.
- *Third Circle:* Outsiders inside the building: circulation, production, pressroom, advertising.
- *Fourth Circle:* Readers as advisory groups

The purpose of the idea group meetings is to draw on as much creativity, knowledge and contacts that an organization has to offer.

This approach “frees assignment editors and section editors from the burnout burden of having to be the font of creative ideas all the time and have permitted an environment for reporters to think big without limitations” (Ryan and O'Donnell 2001).

## **2. Maestros Coaching Writers (The Pre-Maestro Check)**

This involves four sub-steps where instead of telling the reporter what to do, the maestro *asks questions*, to help the reporter to:

- summarize the story in 30 words or less.
- draft a headline with confidence.
- sketch out an acceptable lead for the story.
- brainstorm on readers' questions.

The maestro is assessing whether or not to move forward with a maestro session, which in this case would involve a copy editor, a photographer, an illustrator and a page designer. It is emphasised that, before this session, the reporter must have done some pre-reporting research, so the maestro's role is to do more with reporting and publishing, not ideas at the beginning stage.

Anticipating readers' questions, then answering them quickly on a page is a central challenge. The sharper the skill in anticipating these questions, the more engaging and relevant the publication will be to its readers. By listing the key questions to be answered by a story, the maestro has also created a short checklist for a critique of the story package after publication.

## **3. Maestro Sessions**

These are 10- to 15-minute story planning sessions for the key players involved in a story package to focus the story, to clarify its relevance to readers and to ensure that questions on the top of a reader's mind are answered quickly on the newspaper page. This occurs after preliminary reporting but before writing.

The maestros (senior editors or their delegates) have authority but ideally everyone involved with the story namely reporters, assignment editors, photographers, designers, copy editors, artists, researchers, et al., have the right to freely discuss story lengths, layout, photo and graphics requests, draft headlines and leads. Then the Maestros will have a final decision on the placement, colour, and space of the article/story. It is emphasized that there must be maestros with decision-making authority, otherwise the sessions will become frustrating and wasted.

#### ***4. “Audits” as Constructive Critiques***

The session uses the reader-friendliness index, meaning answer the question: How many of the readers’ questions identified in the maestro session were answered in photos, illustrations, headlines, captions, pull-quotes, sidebar graphics or other display type? The session also emphasises continuous improvement by trying to answer the question: How can we work better and faster as a team?

#### ***Maestro and Organisational Communication***

Ryan claims that Maestro increases communication in newsrooms, and improving communication also promotes efficiency. It minimizes, for example, the mistake that the author thinks is the most common that copy editors make in traditional newsrooms where reporters and copy editors work separately - changing something that is unclear in a story to make the story clearly wrong.

#### ***Maestro in Practice***

According to Ryan Maestro works for all kind of news institutions and has international and cross-cultural appeal. By September 1999, the impact had spread to more than 435 newspapers, news organizations, institutes or universities (50 universities) in 48 states in the USA and 12 other countries. He argues that the benefits include:

- *Fewer Rewrites:* Writers and editors see less need to rewrite stories because of missing information or organization problems.
- *Fewer Unpublished Photos:* Photographers and photo editors see less need to reshoot photos, and clearer assignments reduce wasted time and effort.
- *Cost-Cutting:* Gas-mileage reimbursement checks dropped to \$300 a month from \$350 for photographers at the first paper to adopt the Maestro Concept.
- *More Camaraderie:* Teamwork across sections and departments raises the respect for each other’s contribution to the paper. Journalists have more fun (Ryan 1999).

In an independent study, Jacobsen (2003) reports that the positive feedback of Maestro in Scandinavian countries include:



- “Visually stronger stories
- Stronger angles on stories
- Reporter and subeditor both have control over the story
- Better planning of larger projects
- Better pictures, graphics and layout
- Frame for better coaching
- A tool for cross-newsroom learning”

But Jacobsen also notes the following barriers/disadvantages of Maestro or versions of Maestro:

- “The dangers of predetermining angles
- Photographers fear limitations to their work
- General contempt of models and diagrams
- Lack of attention in the beginning of the process
- Difficult to implement in small newsrooms
- Difficult to include editorial visualizers
- Employees are tired of meetings”

Ryan (1999) himself accepts that application of Maestro is more difficult than it looks. After the ten years of Maestro being employed by media institutions, “battling tradition is grueling” and “success is not forever”. Newsrooms have reported that their stories “blew up” after maestro sessions which made people feel frustrated and that time had been wasted, rather than effectively managed. The reasons include:

- not enough pre-reporting had been done;
- “asking traditionally trained reporters to think of writing headlines, let alone consider a headline before a story is written, is a real stretch”;

Ryan argues that biggest difficulty is to “hurdle tradition”, by which he means deep-root beliefs that:

- i) “journalists need to all the reporting before they can even think about writing, photo, design, editing
- ii) reporters should write their stories before talking to their editors about leads

iii) writing headlines, captions and doing graphics are not reporters' jobs."

To be successful, therefore Maestro has to redesign news workers mind-sets. Maestro requires staff members to think about their job titles, roles and responsibilities differently. It changes who does what when and where in the newsroom, and how the classic journalistic questions— who, what, when and where—get answered on a page. As it is so "foreign" to traditional newsrooms, "it takes diplomatic skill to be a maestro."

Currently, Ryan (2010) defines the different newsroom challenges of yesterday (original Maestro Concept) regarding TIME-management and of today (new Media Maestro for interactive, multimedia) as ENERGY-management: so many options for coverage (print, audio slideshow, video) and so many new strains on internal communication for coordination.

Ryan (2010) believes that Maestro's future lies in advertising and online journalism. He has developed his Online Action Editor approach on the basis of Maestro. The author claims "the key in the new world order is to increase efficiency (lower newsroom costs), improve quality (as measured by online responses) and generate a new revenue stream in a world ("commerce editor) that lies outside the newsroom but between marketing and advertising sales that's called 'affiliated marketing'."

#### **4. Summary and further discussion: The use of the literature and this thesis' contribution back to it**

The above literature review shows that media studies researchers have put a great amount of effort into media survival and development practices and strategies, which spread in all aspects of media production and distribution. This sufficient and helpful literature body guides me in the design of my research to answer the first question: "How are Vietnamese newspapers strategically responding to the changing environment?"

Aside from the political control/censorship that is specific for Vietnam, the news media have to respond to the changes in the external environment, discussed in chapter II, especially the economic liberalization and technological changes which

are also observed in the West. Vu (2008) surveys controversial media literature from production, distribution and consumption perspectives and concludes that despite the digital revolution's great impacts on the media activities, the basis of media economics remains unchanged.

Therefore, the media studies including media economics and media management literature is helpful as a framework to examine the Vietnamese media's business strategies.

However, almost all the studies are based in the West and, thus, reflect the Western contexts. Moreover, many of the economic theories look at the media in entertainment, not news, sector. The question is whether the theories also apply to news business, and in Vietnam. On the other hand, many news houses in the work in general and Vietnam in particular are producing entertainment content as well as news. The research on Vietnamese newsrooms will therefore help understand the relevance of these mostly-Western studies.

Media studies including media economics and media management literature provide theoretical framework to study Vietnamese media's not only business but also communication strategies as the trends noted in the literature namely convergence, concentration, integration/collaboration, globalization, etc. in my view, demand much more improved communication from different parties. For instance, Dailey, Demo et al.'s (2003) model measures the level of convergence by examining merely whether or not the interaction, sharing and exchanging take place, not how they take place. From this standpoint, I believe there is a need for a more quality-based assessment of the interaction facilitating the convergence process. In this context, my research results might be of use.

My second and third research questions about strategy implementation in newsrooms and the role of communication in the process are a little trickier.

Internal communication as a theme hardly is studied by media researchers even though it seems everything else studied has something to do with communication. While the news production and convergence research helps describe newsroom dynamics within organizational culture, it hardly addresses the issue of efficiency which is the focus of this research study. However, even little discussion about production efficiency, or the lack of it, by news production researchers such as

Tuchman (1978) and Schlesinger (1987) serves as a frame which I developed further. Schlesinger claims that journalists are most concerned about efficiency. The reasons for inefficiency include an absence of a central newsdesk, the separation of different departments, poor personnel arrangement, etc. Tuchman finds out that flexibility is important and news organisations maintain flexibility and save money by discouraging complex bureaucracy and by encouraging reporters' professionalism which means "knowing how to get a story that meets the organisational needs and standards".

And media organizations do not seem to have found their way into internal/employee communication or even organizational or management studies. This, on one hand, makes my project more relevant as it is a unique bridge connecting those research lines. On the other hand, there is no "fast food" recipe for my research design. Still, by bringing in and being selective from different perspectives such as media economics, news values and newsroom/news production practices, media management in particular and organizational management in general as well as organizational internal communication, I have developed a guideline for my empirical research in Vietnam.

All the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier in this chapter are in a way or another and to some extent important for my research. The review of the main organizational communication research perspectives by Blundel (2004) helped position this study. According to this way of categorization, my research actually has some elements of each perspective, but overall it is more interpretive.

Of the theories used, Kueng's media strategic management model (Kueng 2007b; Kueng 2008), Robbins and Judge's framework (Robbins and Judge 2007; 2008), Burke-Litwin Causal Model of Performance and Change (Burke 2002) and Buck Ryan's newsroom "Maestro concept" (Ryan and O'Donnell 2001; Ryan 2010) are probably the most evident. The latter is tested as a communication model while the earlier three are used as frameworks to measure the effectiveness of Maestro and other newsroom practices/strategies. As both Kueng and Burke's models lack communication, which, in my view, plays an important role in newsroom activities, the factor is added in my own model, which I adapt from theirs.

It can be said that Keung and Burke's models serve as the skeleton for my research design while Newstrom and Davis' models of organizational behavior and organisational culture (Davis 1967; Newstrom and Davis 1993), Robbins and Judge (2008) and Schein (2004)'s texts on organizational culture, Yukl (2006), Kotter (2006), Newstrom and Davis (1993)'s discussion on leadership are the "meat" to the skeleton as they help explain the interaction among those essential elements.

Blundel's (2004) view on effective communication is adapted in this study such that "effective communication" suggests that one can achieve their intended aim(s) through skillful application of communication knowledge and techniques, or even simpler: "effective communication" is using communication as a tool in a way that achieves intended aim(s).

Robbins and Judge' theory (2007; 2008), together with the other theories discussed in this chapter, provides some framework for my research. Many questions can be asked, for instance: what kinds of informal communication are there in the newsrooms – how people think and talk to each other about others' performance, policies, fairness, payment, etc? How does it affect journalists'/managers' behaviors? What about formal communication procedures? Do people follow instructions? What kinds of information/ ideas/ topics are communicated formally and informally? What do people make sense about that? Are business goals/visions clearly communicated in the newsrooms? What are praises and sanctions like? What could be done better? How does the reality affect working environment and people's behaviors and performance/productivity, what do they like or dislike? Is it the matter of policy or communication? How do journalists fulfill their social needs and express their work/social satisfaction or frustration? What are the communication channels used and their implications? How do reporters/editors/managers/photojournalists, web/etc. make decisions regarding their work – news values, story selection and process, home rules, etc? How is teamwork – how do team members communicate/work with each other? What are the consequences of different communication practices?,etc.

Robbins and Judge's view was also checked in Vietnamese newsrooms. The media managers were asked how to maintain control over members, if they stimulate their staff, if they provide an encouraging environment and channels for

staff to express themselves, how they make decision about publication/editing/selection of articles, etc., if they have feedback from staffs and if they act upon the feedbacks.

However, most of the factors they mention are individual-related or intra-personal, and, thus, are difficult to intervene by managers. The authors fail to address many other organizational factors which, I believe, are very important, such as discouraging work and social environment, complicated and hierarchical organizational structure and culture, discouraging management styles, confusing and emergent situations, ambiguous messages and communication channels, etc. This particular discourse, therefore, is more relevant to individual than organizational communication and, thus, is less helpful as a guidance to improve organizational productivity and performance, except for the possibility of providing communication training for staffs.

Robbins and Judge's discussion of current issues in communication is interesting to me. The issues, according to them, are: communication barriers between women and men, silence as communication, 'politically correct' communication, and cross-cultural communication.

Still, again their focus is more on individual communication. Of course, this has some relevance to managers who need to improve their personal communication to different people at work. Nevertheless, it is not enough as a guide to assess an organisation's communication effectiveness or to offer suggestions upon improvement.

Robbins and Judge argue that "communication plays a significant role in determining the level of employee motivation" (p.174). This view would be checked in Vietnamese newsrooms by asking questions such as: how are the factors (effort – performance – reward – goals (individuals' and organisation's) connected or perceivably connected? Is the connection made clear to everyone in the newsrooms? Are there any conflicts and if yes, how are they dealt with? Etc.

My questions are: Is it possible use of the models to explain the situation in Vietnam? Are there possibilities that more than one model are used in the same newsroom combining the models? Will it depend on the time/momentum/circumstance/situations, etc? How the theory of organizational

behavior explain the Maestro model, which has been applied successfully in many newsrooms as discussed in section 11 and which emphasizes teamwork but also highlights the decision-making status of leadership at the final stage of idea/story process.

Because, there are as many versions of Maestro as many news organizations that use it (cited by the author), the model needs to be tested from different perspectives to see its advantages and disadvantages, if there are any loopholes, whether the new organizations have to compromise anything, whether there are any other obstacles to its use beside the “old tradition” of thinking which the author acknowledges. One question, for instance, is: Could the model, despite claiming to take audience into account, in fact reinforce the journalists’ authority as they might unconsciously exert their own ideas while still believing or claiming them as the audience’s ones<sup>15</sup>?

In this light, Maestro will be tested against my model of internal factors affecting newsroom effectiveness. And it will be examined how it is interpreted, used, altered and evaluated in Vietnamese newsrooms as well as its results or consequences.

It is noted that, the version of the model used in Vietnam seems different as the Swedish trainers, who introduced it to Vietnamese newsrooms, tend to make it “lighter”. It is not even clear whether the Swedes themselves know the original version of Maestro.

The Maestro author notes: “a common misconception is that somehow the Maestro Concept must apply to all stories all the time.” This actually is the way the concept was introduced to many Vietnamese newsrooms! However, for one reason or another, not every story reflects the use of Maestro. This will be discussed in the following chapters.

Instead, the author believes the concept should apply to only the best stories, especially those that require photography, design and information graphics as “routine stories can be handled in routine ways. Opportunities for high impact and

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<sup>15</sup> Ryan himself notes that a study “revealed that loyal Baby Boom newspaper readers, aged 25 to 43 at that time, did not always read newspapers the way many journalists thought they did. For example, color photos had less impact than expected in attracting attention to news stories; small visuals significantly increased the likelihood that a related headline would be read; and readers preferred brightly colored pages that designers considered troubling.”

readership are lost when great stories get routine presentation.” The focus is on choosing one great story idea and creating one team to bring it to life on a page.

As from the author’s text, it is not clear how to define before reporting what ideas are the best or, in other words, what stories should be Maestroed; and what if the stories turn out not usable/publishable, etc. This will be tested in Vietnamese newsrooms where Maestro has just been implemented.

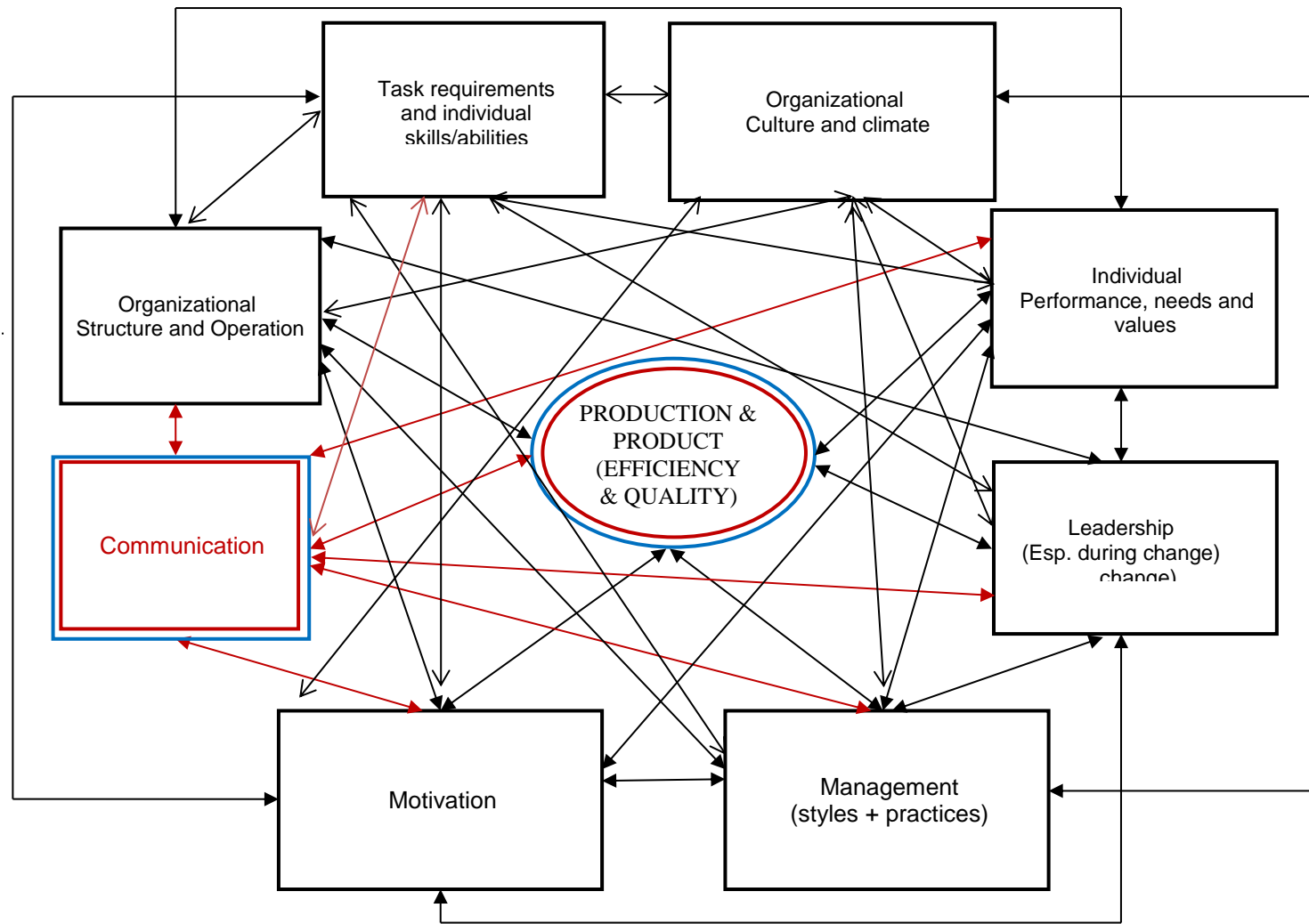
Needless to say that the outside-media-organization factors discussed in the appendix 1 also play an important role and, thus, should be read together with the main body of the thesis.

To summarise the whole chapter, I am reproducing the theoretical framework of my study. In return, hopefully, my research will not only bring Vietnam’s perspectives but also helps reducing the gaps in the existing literature as mentioned above.



## NEWSROOM EFFECTIVENESS

FIGURE 2: INTERNAL FACTORS AFFECTING NEWSROOM PERFORMANCE



### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

"Good social science is problem driven and not methodology driven" (Flyvbjerg 2006). "It is crucial that researchers assess the relevance of different methodologies with reference to the purposes and objects of analysis" (Jensen 1991: 6).

Therefore, this chapter will start again with the presentation of the research questions:

1. What are the strategies Vietnamese media are employing to cope with the changing environment including subsidy/cost cuttings and increased competition while under closed political and ownership control?
2. What are the problems that hinder newsroom efficiency at Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre?
3. What are the newsrooms' operational strategies to correct the problems?
4. What are the barriers to changes in the newsrooms?
5. What is the role of communication in newsroom management?

**1. Research question 1:** What are the strategies Vietnamese media are employing to cope with the changing environment including subsidy/cost cuttings and increased competition while under closed political and ownership control?

To address this question about the general directions/strategies of the news media, of course the most simplistic and the easiest way is to ask them! However, media practitioners might not have reflection or awareness of the strategies as my empirical data show. Nor might they want to tell (or tell the truth) due to competitive or personal or organizational reasons. Also, in order to answer the question fully, a researcher might need a big representative cohort of interviewees across the industry in terms of genres, media, and geography, which is costly, time-consuming and might be very difficult in terms of access. These disadvantages of interviewing as a method of enquiry are confirmed by many researchers namely Judd et al (1991: 219) and Sarantakos (Sarantakos 1993: 199),

Hakim (1987) and May (2001)], Oppenheim (2000: 65) despite its power to find out things that we cannot observe (Patton 1990; in Arksey and Knight 1999: 2).

The research question about media strategies can also be addressed by observation as done by some media management researchers (e.g. Kueng 2008). However, their research is based on one or two specific (usually elite) media organisations, so it is difficult to generalize the data. Their approach is helpful for the next research questions (to be discussed later) but has limited power in answering this question about the media industry in general.

Observation has the power to bring deep insights into research problem Brown (n.a.) and can compensate for interview's shortcomings such as the respondents do not know or want to answer. However, again, like interview, in order to understand the strategies employed by the whole news media industry, observation would be impossible in terms of time and costs if the researcher has not previous knowledge, experience and contacts in the field. Large survey might work, but again, it is very costly and it is difficult to cover all aspects of the question.

Therefore, an existing overview knowledge and understanding of, and a large contact network in the media industry, which operates in a wider specific political, economic and social context, as well as *a combination of observation, interview, public discourse survey and document analysis* will help answer this research question.

The mix-method was employed to make use of the advantages and limit the disadvantages of each method. The triangulation is to “fully understand the nature of a research problem” (Wimmer and Dominick 2003) as it:

- a) “allows researchers to be more confident of their results
- b) stimulates the development of creative ways of collecting data
- c) can lead to thicker, richer data
- d) can lead to the synthesis or integration of theories
- e) can uncover contradictions, and
- f) may serve as the litmus test for competing theories, by virtue of its comprehensiveness” (Jick 1979; cited in Johnson, Onwuegbuzie et al. 2007: 115)

I have nearly 20 years working as a reporter, copy editor, editor, head of department, assistant producer, trainer, training assistant, lecturer, researcher and consultant in different media (print, online and TV) and media training institutions, as well as several years as media relations and public relations consultant. I have direct contact with at least a few hundred of media practitioners of different positions and media policy makers. My interest, observation and reflection of the news media industry and my contact network make this research possible.

To answer the first research question about news media's strategies to cope with political and economic changes, during my fieldwork in Vietnam between August 2009-June 2010, I:

- had quick interviews and/or unofficial talks with nearly thirty editors in chief, deputy editors in chief or high-ranked influential middle managers from different newspapers about the general situation in their newsrooms as well as their survival and development strategies. About half of the respondents were asked during a training course on media management organised by the Vietnam Journalists' Association where I worked as an interpreter while the other half were interviewed either in their workplaces or by telephone. Usually to each respondent, only two big questions were asked: 1) How is your newspaper doing these days? What are the challenges you are facing? 2) What are you doing to improve the situation and/or develop? And in six of the cases, when the respondents seemed to be willing to spend more time answering my questions, I also asked whether and how they inform their staffs about their new strategies.
- had casual talks with at least 40 journalists (including reporters, copy editors and low middle managers meaning heads or deputy heads of content departments) from different news organisations other than the two case studies about the situation in their newsrooms, and whether they are informed of and involved in their newsrooms' trends/strategies development and implementation.
- In-person or telephone short interviews or casual talks with media experts or officials from media authorities such as the Authority of Press, Ministry of

Information and Communication (three persons); Central Party Department of Ideology (two persons); Vietnam Journalists' Association (four persons); two secret policepersons; some high-profile politicians and/or persons involving in the media field such as members of Central Party Committee and members of Parliament who might or might not also hold high positions, usually editors-in-chief, in influential media organisations; as well as media lecturers and researchers in media educational institutions in Vietnam.

- In-person, telephone, or online interviews/talks as well as everyday interaction and discussions with a few tens of journalists, and casual random talks with many others including non-journalists working in different media houses across the country. The journalists are of different positions in newsrooms, ranging from newly-recruited reporters to copy editors, photojournalists/camerapersons, editors and/or managers of all different levels, but the majority of them are around my age, meaning mid-career journalists many of whom hold middle-management positions such as heads or deputy heads of departments or news editors, managing directors, etc. One of the advantages of having such middle-career journalists and especially the middle-managers as informants is that they are those who often:

- \* have been in the industry long enough to have more or less full picture; and usually they are able, willing and even having the needs to discuss the situation in a broader perspective; and

- \* are the "backbone" of their newsrooms who connect the top management and all staffs and, thus, are well informed of the newsrooms activities.

These semi-structured interviews brought me good semi-quantitative data on what journalists in Vietnam think about this questions, which, in their turn, boost the confidence in the case studies' data (to be discussed below). As such, I have data about two different types of research objects - one being the news industry in Vietnam while the other being the two case companies. By comparing the two types of data, I could, to some extent, better validate my case study data, as

proven by many leading mixed-methods researchers as discussed above (see Johnson, Onwuegbuzie et al. 2007).

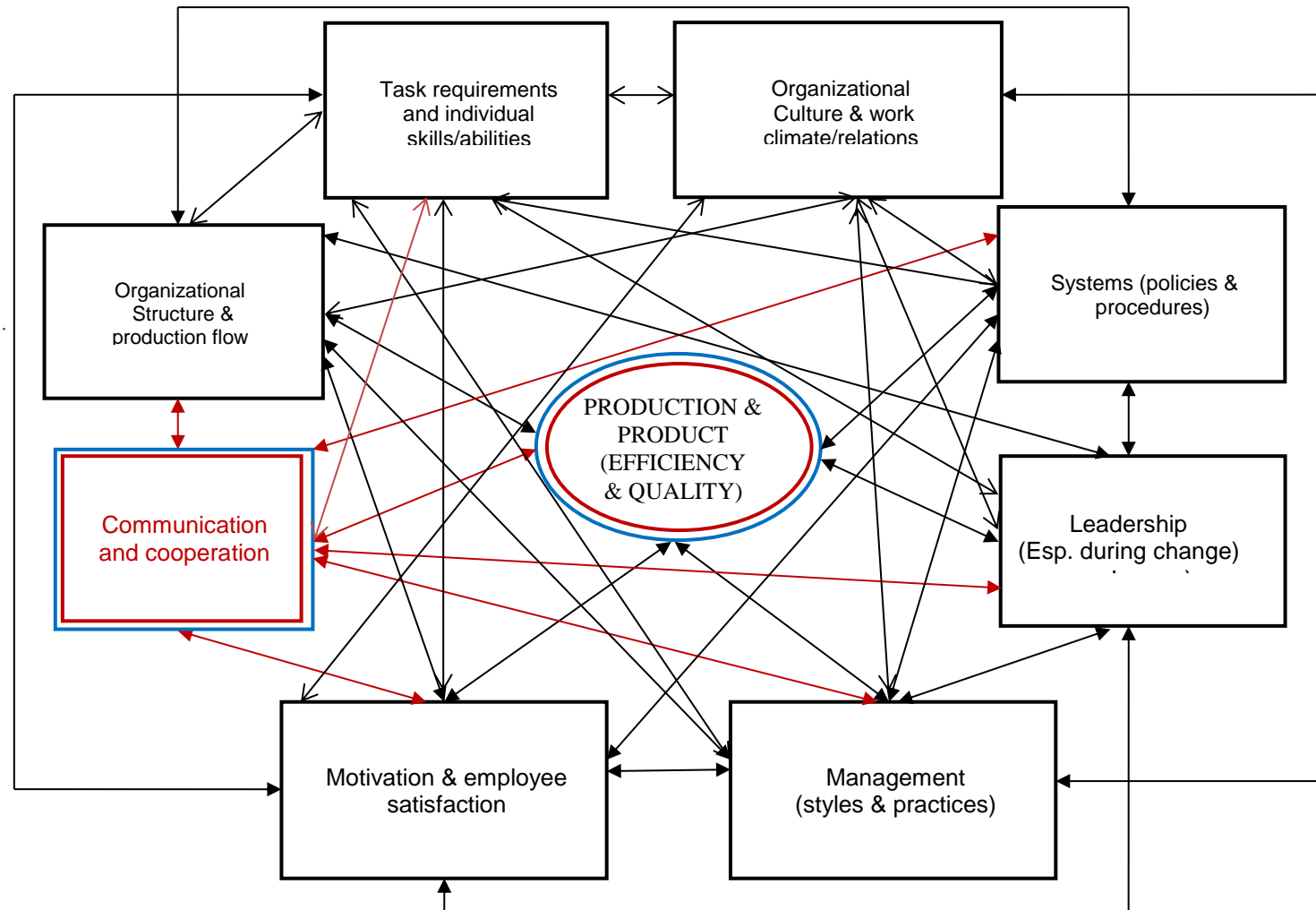
## **2. Research questions 2-5:**

2. What are the problems that hinder newsroom efficiency at Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre?
3. What are the newsrooms' operational strategies to correct the problems?
4. What are the barriers to changes in the newsrooms?
5. What is the role of "communication" in newsroom management?

As mentioned earlier, the following theoretical model has been produced as framework to examine the variables and their relationship in enabling or constraining newsroom effectiveness:

## NEWSROOM EFFECTIVENESS

FIGURE 2: INTERNAL FACTORS AFFECTING NEWSROOM EFFICIENCY



The nature of these questions concerning newsroom efficiency demands a deep understanding of a real internal production setting including practices, processes and people and how these factors interact and affect each other. Therefore, ethnography is an obvious choice.

### ***2.1. Ethnography***

“***Ethnography*** is a holistic approach to the study of cultural systems. Ethnography is the study of the socio-cultural contexts, processes, and meanings within cultural systems.” (Whitehead 2005)

The problem with ethnographic studies is that ethnographic research is done in natural setting and focuses on real processes which cannot be reproduced correctly (Wiersma 1986) meaning there is an issue of reliability.

Schlesinger (1987) believes that ethnography offers insights which are “otherwise unavailable” and it “permits the theoretically informed observation of the social practices of cultural production” (p. xxxii). He finds that production studies can address the limitations of external analyses of cultural products (by using content, textual or discourse analysis techniques) being “only being able to make inferences about the actual processes of production inside cultural institutions and organisations, and thus face a lacuna in any explanation offered.” ” (p.xxxii) Production studies, by contrast, can offer “a sophisticated appreciation of the complex and ramified nature of editorial systems”. Also, very importantly (and relevant to my research), “ethnographic studies permit the observation of how specific problems are dealt with which are otherwise concealed from the analysts of texts or content who are confronted with the products of action but denied access to the processes which lie behind them.” (p. xxxii)

The 'first wave' of substantive ethnographic studies of news production conducted across the 1970s and 1980s and though relatively few in number, these proved to be highly influential “Collectively they demonstrated how the indepth study of news producers, their cultural milieu and professional domains could help to explain the dynamics and determinants of news output.” (Cottle 2000)

These news production studies, which focus on the ideological nature of news, have not been found attractive by journalists who believe the theories “are largely irrelevant to the practicalities of the news-gathering operation” Venables (1993:



x). Journalists' biggest concern, beside wages and conditions, is efficiency (Schlesinger 1987).

Current technologies have been changing the news production and this challenge the theories even more (Cottle 2000). However, this author believes that methodologically, "ethnographic studies of news remain important, essential even, because they:

- attend to the normally invisible world of media production and render this 'visible' through study, analysis and interpretation;
- by such means they can help counter the 'problem of inference' (the 'reading off' from media texts alone erroneous explanations and/or journalist motivations thought to 'explain' this output);
- improve upon other methods through triangulation in the field;
- qualify or correct speculative and generalising theoretical claims;
- reveal the contingent nature of cultural production; and
- also provide us with insights into, and understanding of, the dynamic and embedded nature of cultural production." (Cottle 2000 note 4, p35)

As the research questions about newsroom efficiency and factors affecting strategy implementation demand an in-depth examination of processes and practices, it is impossible to carry out ethnography across all the media organisations. Case study therefore is chosen.

## **2.2. Case study**

Case study as a research method has been successfully used by many communication, media and management researchers, e.g. (Childs 1999; Zhang and Xiaoming 1999; Marshall 2004; Min 2004; Nip 2004; Dupagne and Garrison 2006). Researchers use case studies "with the attention of shedding light on general processes, but the results are not generalizable in the statistical sense" (Priest 1996).

For a more detailed review of case study as a research method, see Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) who points out and proves wrong the following five misunderstandings about case-study research:

- “General, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge.
- One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development.
- The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses; that is, in the first stage of a total research process, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building.
- The case study contains a bias toward verification, that is, a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions.
- It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies”. (p221)

In media research, case study has been used to examine distinct approaches to organisation and production in contemporary alternative media. It helps understand how different alternative media work in practice and each case can focus on a different aspect of organisation and production (Atton 2003)

Case studies, based on interviews, field observations and document analysis, are also used to understand the relationship between technological innovation and workplace reorganisation through the perceptions, experiences and understandings of the participants themselves (Hansen, Cottle et al. 1998; Marjoribanks 2003)

In order to obtain the quality insights into the newsrooms, and due to the limited time and resources, only two outlier (far-end deviant) case studies were proposed.

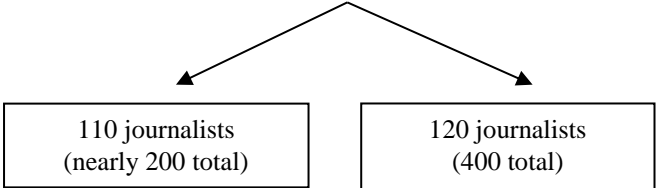
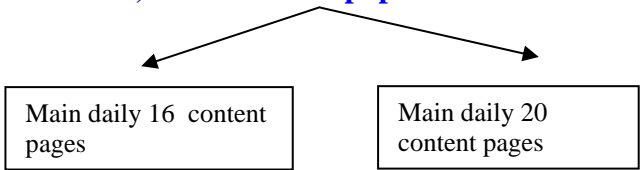
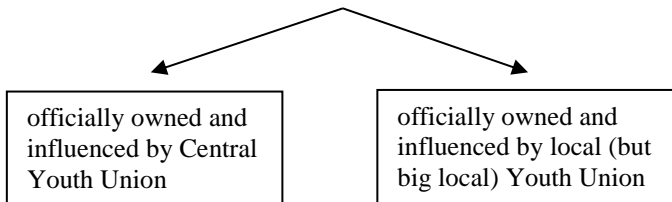
#### *Case Study Selection – Issue of Access*

The main part of the research was to be done on two most influential Vietnamese newspapers: *Nhan Dan (The People)* and *Tuoi Tre (The Youth)*.

The two newspapers were chosen because of their huge influence on the rest of the industry. They were chosen as industry **leading** case studies. Their value is that based on findings from these case studies it would not be unreasonable to generalise that many industry follower companies would adopt similar strategies and possibly find similar problems.

However, Nhan Dan turned out to be inaccessible (details discussed soon below), so Tien Phong, a typical middle-ranked daily, was taken as a substitute. The following table compares my two actual cases (with perceived similarities and differences):

**Figure 7: Comparison of Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre newspapers**

Tien Phong	Tuoi Tre	Notes
<b>National daily</b>		
<b>Professionally prestigious/trusted/serious</b>		
<b>High circulation/readership ratio</b>		Those who buy actually read the papers, not as in case of Nhan Dan which is not read by many buyers
<b>Big journalistic staff</b>  <pre> graph TD     A[Big journalistic staff] --&gt; B[110 journalists (nearly 200 total)]     A --&gt; C[120 journalists (400 total)] </pre>		
<b>Each has main/core daily serious paper, other publications, and an online paper</b>  <pre> graph TD     A[Each has main/core daily serious paper, other publications, and an online paper] --&gt; B[Main daily 16 content pages]     A --&gt; C[Main daily 20 content pages] </pre>		
<b>Currently under more political influence</b>  <pre> graph TD     A[Currently under more political influence] --&gt; B[officially owned and influenced by Central Youth Union]     A --&gt; C[officially owned and influenced by local (but big local) Youth Union] </pre>		Tuoi Tre is owned by Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union, which is part of the Central Youth Union.
<b>New editor-in-chief (late 2008, early 2009)</b>		Due to the current political situation (see more in

		chapter II) both have new editors in chief assigned by the Union
<p><b>New editor-in-chief has political and industrial experience</b></p> <p>↓</p> <p>Directly involved with content production</p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>New executive management</b></p>	<p><b>New editor-in-chief has political, NOT industrial experience</b></p> <p>↓</p> <p>Allegedly not directly involved with detailed content production</p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>Same executive management</b></p>	See more in chapter V and later in this chapter
<p><b>Middle circulation</b></p> <p>↓</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">70,000 copies</div>	<p><b>High circulation</b></p> <p>↓</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">450.000 copies</div>	These were the numbers during my fieldwork in late 2009-mid 2010. The numbers as of mid 2011 are 150,000 and 470,000 respectively. However, according to some of my anonymous sources, Tuoi Tre's claimed circulation better reflects the truth while Tien Phong's could be twice the actual number. If it is the case, the numbers presented in the left columns probably better reflect the reality.
<b>Little ads</b>	<b>Biggest amount of ads</b>	

(average 2 full pages/issue)	<b>in the industry</b> (average 40 pages/issue as of 2009 and 80 pages/issue as of mid 2011)	
<b>Distributed mainly to state-owned subscribing organisations</b>	<b>Widely bought by both subscribing organisations and individual readers on street</b>	One middle manager from Tuoi Tre says that the demands from advertisers are even more, but Tuoi Tre cannot publish them all due to the current advertising regulation <sup>16</sup>

I contacted the proposed newspapers (Tuoi Tre and Nhan Dan) for permission to do the research already in early 2008. However, there were important changes in the management boards that affected the decision.

Nhan Dan has been the biggest and most influential party-run newspapers in Vietnam. However, recently the government has put the paper under high pressure by cutting down, and now stopping, subsidies. Before that, public organizations and many businesses (who were forced by the Party and Government to buy Nhan Dan newspaper for decades) had stopped buying the newspaper.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I talked to some people from the paper and the Ministry of Information and Communication who administrates media organisations and found that the situation there was very confusing and complicated. The political tension those days had made the highest boss – the editor in chief- very unpredictable. Even some government-run media projects

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<sup>16</sup> which regulates types of advertisements/products/services, maximum amount of time/space, requirements for products, etc. to be advertised. See the whole Regulation, available at [http://laws.dongnai.gov.vn/2001\\_to\\_2010/2001/200111/200111160005](http://laws.dongnai.gov.vn/2001_to_2010/2001/200111/200111160005) for more details.

recently have failed to reach the paper<sup>17</sup>. For instance, an in-house journalistic training course arranged by the Ministry of Information and Communication was about to take place. Some foreign trainers had been sent from overseas. The day before the course was supposed to begin, the editor in chief said: “We don’t need this course”! So, given this, there was no surprise that my access to the paper was limited!

### *2.2.1. Selecting Tien Phong Case Study*

I had to turn to Tien Phong, which is an average national newspaper headquartered in Hanoi. Needless to say, the very first reason was actually simply that the boss said yes to me! However another reason for choosing Tien Phong daily is that it is kind of **typical** for Vietnam: average circulation (officially 70-80 000 copies at the time I started my research, now the published number is 150 000), average income and facing the same tough market competition in paper and advertising selling as many other newspapers and unlike Nhan Dan which operates in a different market<sup>18</sup>.

This resulted in the opportunity to compare a leading company with a more typical, smaller and less financially secure company. This would make a good and interesting, yet still relevant and compatible, comparison with Tuoi Tre as case studies.

And as regard to the main research question about the role of internal communication, here we have one typical case (Tien Phong) and one outlier case (Tuoi Tre) instead of two far-end outlier cases as initially planned. This access problem, in my view, turned out to be good as the generalisability of the data might be higher with case of Tien Phong while we still have Tuoi Tre as a far-end variation. Having said that, I do not aim to replicate the research results, taking

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the Party-Government relationship (see more in Context Chapter II) sometimes makes it complicated and hard for power exercising in the country. Although the Ministry officially monitors all the news media including Nhan Dan, in fact the newspaper is considered a "ministry-level" organ and the editor-in-chief can even have "higher power" than the Minister as the editor-in-chief of the newspaper has always been a member of the Party's Central Committee while the minister might not.

<sup>18</sup> if it could be called market, because it is party-owned and run (the copies are not usually sold widely to general public), and it does not do much journalism.

into account the limitations of ethnography as discussed above and the fact that problem of access has prevented me to obtain information of exact same kind in the two organisations as mentioned below.

### *2.2.2. Fieldwork reality*

Ethnography involving qualitative interview, observation and document analysis were proposed as methods of enquiries for both case studies. However, due to problems with access, I did not only have to choose another case than planned but also had to adopt different methods to each case.

“The means of access are controlled by those that are being observed”. “No sociological study, so far as I know, has been published on the higher reaches of policy-making and corporate planning by media owners and controllers” (Schlesinger 1987: xxxiii). However, difficulties provide insights into the activities being observed (Tuchman 1978, who also had difficulties obtaining participant observation for his research).

On 2009 New Year Eve, Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien (the second biggest market-oriented newspaper in Vietnam) received a shocking decision from their owning organizations (Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Organisation and Vietnam National Youth Federation respectively) that their editors-in-chief would finish their position the next day 1 January. This followed the arrest of two of their journalists earlier and was believed to be one of the consequences of their allowing the papers criticize corruption and government failures.

After the sacking, Tuoi Tre did not have an editor-in-chief for four months. The new editor-in-chief was a party high figure with no media background.

He was new to office and, thus, is a bit cautious (especially in the light of some press cards from his paper withdrawn every now and then, and warning visits by the Press Bureau’s officers including one by the Bureau’s Head during my visit to the paper in October. Also, he was concerned with his organisation’s business secrets which I think is reasonable considering the competition now in the field. Therefore, after a long hesitance (I had to wait for 2 months), he allowed me to do interviews but refused me to do observations meaning I could not attend their

daily and other periodical meetings. I could not access their internal communication documents, etc.

He found many reasons not to be interviewed: trips, meetings, work load, etc. But I could interview 20 of his staffs including the general managing editor who has been in the job for years and who has been very helpful and informative.

The rest of the interviews were good too, thanks to my personal relation to the journalists obtained through training courses I had had with them earlier (one 2-week in 2007 and one 2-week in October 2009, to be explained below).

The journalists of different ages and positions namely reporters, sub-editors, editors, layout persons, heads of departments, executive editing managers, were interviewed mostly in-person (some over the phone) about changes in the newsrooms over the years, how they made sense of the changes, how internal communication was in their newsrooms, what the teamwork was like, how they went about their job, what they thought of and related to their newsroom's communication policies and practices, etc., meaning the fieldwork guideline that I developed after doing the literature review was used for the interviews.

During my fieldwork time, I worked as an interpreter and co-trainer on 2 media management courses run by Vietnam-Sweden journalistic project - one was for 20 bosses of different newspapers in northern Vietnam and the other was for about 35 middle managers of Tuoi Tre, one of the two cases I am studying. The reasons I did the job are:

- money to survive, and travel expenses for the first trip to the south.
- better access to the newspapers (because access to media houses in Vietnam depends a lot on personal relationships to the media people, especially the bosses.)
- the content of the courses, especially the one at Tuoi Tre, was relevant to my research. Tuoi Tre's news managing editor agreed that I could use their middle managers' discussions on the newspaper's current situations (including in terms of communication) as part of my research. It was a great chance for me. I would never have been able to have such focus groups otherwise!



Tien Phong's editor-in-chief was also newly appointed. But, differently from Tuoi Tre's case, Tien Phong's boss has been in the industry (even with a different kind of papers) for many years. This man has been trying to rearrange the whole organization. A lot of things are happening at the paper. Many staffs are enthusiastic and hopeful while quite a few others seem to be very critical of his way, so it actually has been an interesting case.

I started working with Tien Phong in mid November 2009 and basically finished in May 2010. I wanted to go back to the paper as I learnt that the editor-in-chief was introducing a new communication method at work which created both enthusiasms and doubts among staffs. However, I could not reach the editor-in-chief when I was back in Vietnam in November/December 2010 as he was out of town on the police's requests. The staffs were also hesitant to talk with outsiders due to the stressful situation in the newsroom<sup>19</sup>.

Anyway, during my fieldwork, I did the following with the newspaper:

- First I worked with the R&D department for two full weeks, and then I spent three full-time weeks and four more part-time with the newsroom and one part-time week with the writers' common room.
- Attended their daily meetings and some extra activities (staff day, end-of-year meeting, newspaper's birthday celebration). I was not allowed to attend high level management meetings and a meeting between the top managers and the newspaper's owning organization bosses but I could ask for some

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<sup>19</sup> In mid October 2010, a newly-appointed (from beginning of the month) deputy chief news editor of Tien Phong was urgently arrested by the police with the allegation of corruption and blackmailing a big business company. Soon later, and for a few months long, the newspaper's editor-in-chief and some other editors/journalists from other news organisations were also summoned and questioned by the police for their investigation. I was told by some journalists from the newspaper, and confirmed by the editor-in-chief on the phone, that this incident was heavily affecting the organisation's work spirit for those months. Some journalists also said that it affected the staffs' trust toward the boss, which might have consequences to the future work/communication environment. However, I have not been able to check on this. Otherwise, the newspaper seems to be doing well with the recent launch of two more new publications.

The deputy chief news editor arrested has been in jail since then without a court which is usually supposed to be within 4 months from the date of arrest. There is a widely rumour that the incident has some political elements and links to the Vietnamese Communist Party's Summit in January and corrupt money was only an excuse for the arrest as a starting point for further investigation. Also, it is believed that this was one of the consequences of the editor-in-chief's allowing the newspaper criticize Vinashin, one of the biggest state-owned companies. However, this rumour cannot be checked or confirmed.

information about the meetings. I audio recorded some of the meetings, but took notes of all the meetings.

- Interviewed 18 people including the editor in chief. The content of the interviews was the same as in case of Tuoi Tre. I also had about 5-6 long talks and a lot of shorter ones with the chief news editor (executive editor) at that time. The executive editor was replaced by one of his deputies later but I could not interview the new one.
- Read a few hundred daily and weekly topic reports, which also contain other issues such as circulation in regional areas and feedbacks from departments, communicated within the newsroom.
- Read the newspaper's internal policy documents, reports, and staff survey answers.

Contrary to my situation in Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong's editor-in-chief has been very supportive. He introduced me to the newsroom and that opened the middle managers up. However, I had some difficulties with approaching individual reporters as they, like any other workers in Vietnam, always hesitate to talk about their workplace – a kind of self-censorship – to those they do not know personally. The only reporters that talked freely were those I knew personally before. But this was compensated by the fact that I could access the newspaper's current staff surveys in which the journalists were free to voice. This was very helpful.

Beside the two case studies, in order to have a better picture of the media industry and to put the two case studies in their context, as well as to check the representativeness of the case studies, I also carried quick/casual interviews with the industry's practitioners and authorities as well analyzed relevant bills, laws and public documents, etc.

### ***2.3. Document analysis***

As triangulation, the use of different methods, helps reducing each method's disadvantages and improving the overall research's reliability and credibility (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie et al. 2007), document analysis was also included in my study, but only in Tien Phong's case where I was allowed to access them. The documents include the newsroom's regulations, guidelines, staffs survey

completed questionnaires, etc. My approach is to use the documents such as regulations, announcements of the newsroom to double check the interview and observations. The staffs survey questionnaires were used in the same way as the interview transcriptions as a compensation for the poor number of reporters who were willing to be interviewed (see research reality section). Therefore, the discussion of content analysis as a research method is not raised here.

Beside Tien Phong's internal documents that I was able to access, in order to put the case study in its context, other relevant official statistics, records, documents, etc. were also gathered and analysed, which include secondary data and statistics from different agencies such as Authority of Press - Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communication, and domestic and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs)' project/donor reports. However, it is noted that, strangely enough, the Ministry of Information and Communication, who is the governmental administrator in the news media field, in fact does not do media statistics and analyses regularly and does not have official updated data<sup>20</sup>. The NGOs project or donor reports, on the other hand, like foreign research literature on Vietnamese media, often only focus on the project/donor's specific interest field which, on its turn, usually is macro-level media system as a whole or political characteristics of the media. The reports, therefore, usually neglects other characteristics of the media and the society in general which, I believe, are also important to understand the more complete picture. Some other reports, for instance by Vietnamese authors/consultants, do not at all provide contexts, probably assuming that the context is already known or understood.

Moreover, I regularly read/survey the most popular dailies and periodicals. I also read online newspapers and/or the print papers' online versions. I do not intend to

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<sup>20</sup> Instead, from my observations as someone who personally directly has involved in quite a few projects with the Ministry's offices especially the Press Bureau, only every now and then, for instance when the Ministry's bosses are required to report to the Parliament or the Vietnamese Communist Party's Summits, or when individual departments within the Ministry have cooperative projects with foreign partners/donors and, thus, are required to do reports, they would compile data from different sources in a very casual way and the data, in my personal view, usually very scattered and shallow. When I several times asked for media official statistics such as the total number of each news medium; their circulations, staffs, etc., I was told by the bosses that their staffs are very busy and, thus, of course have no time to compile such statistics! When I ask the staffs, some say they do not know if the data exist and if yes, who should have them. The others claim that of course individual departments should have such data but no one has bothered to put everything together. When I check with individual departments, I am told that they think the data are confidential!

do content analysis but I think the reading helps me to keep track of any big changes to the papers/organisations (for instance new design/layout, new publications, new sections, new versions, etc.) and to cross-check some of my respondents' information about their newspapers' content strategies.

Some conclusions derived from my observation of the media products were not double checked with the newsrooms' personnels meaning they might not correctly reflect the newsrooms' strategies. However, I will make notes when I present such conclusions. Still, I believe media product survey could be a good approach to understand the newsrooms' content and business strategies.

To summarise the above recount of the research methodology:

- Due to the access problem, one of the initially proposed cases was replaced by another case which turned out to be probably even better as it is more typical in Vietnam in terms of size (circulation, staffs, economies, etc.);
- Also due to access, I had to use different methods to generate data about the two studied cases - interview and focus group for Tuoi Tre whereas interview, observation and document analysis for Tien Phong. There was also some difference between the two cases in terms of interview respondents' attitude which obviously affected the interview data.

With Tuoi Tre, observation was refused leaving a big hole in the database considering interviewing's proven disadvantages discussed above.

The unplanned focus groups were fortunate as they brought very good/trustworthy data as the respondents were seriously discussing their newsroom's real situation without any "screens". However, as mentioned earlier, because it was run by someone else than myself, the researcher, and for another purpose (the newsrooms' professional training), the data were not adequate to compensate totally for the lack of observation. Also, despite the fact that I have permission by the chief executive editor to use the focus group content (which was given afterward), there could be an ethical problem as the participants were not aware that what they said would be used for an outsider's research. Still, I do not think they would mind or worry about problems with their bosses, as they were aware

of the fact that what they said were being recorded for the newsroom's internal training and development purposes.

The limited data about Tuoi Tre due to the absence of observation<sup>21</sup> was not only partly compensated by the focus group, but also by the fact that almost all the interview respondents were very open. This was, I believe, mainly thanks to my previous direct contact with them. Besides, it could be contributed to the newspaper's perceived democratic working atmosphere which empowers its staff to speak more freely. This will be discussed more in the result chapters.

Having said that the interview respondents seemed very open and straight in their answers, I do not mean to neglect the possible complications associated with interview as a method of investigation, as indicated by the theorists discussed above.

In case of Tien Phong, on the contrary, while the editor-in-chief, some other high and middle managers and a few journalists who I have had contacts for long before were very open, most other interviewees were much more "cautious" while talking about the situation in their newsrooms and how they feel working there. This, in my view, was due to the fact that I did not have personal/direct contact with them before. Also, contrary to Tuoi Tre, it might be because of the working atmosphere in Tien Phong that make people feel insecure and hesitant.

However, the problems with hesitant interviewees were somehow compensated by my able to observe the newsroom's activities including the newsroom's everyday communication/interaction with the reporters. The observation data, together with data gathered from the newsroom's, the regions/branches' and all the departments' daily, weekly and monthly reports and plans, might be biased as they mostly are from the editors' rather than the reporters' perspective. Nevertheless, the staff two surveys' answers that I could access, where the respondents could choose to be anonymous and, thus, free to express their view about their workplaces, communication, work relations, environment and suggest solutions to improve the newspaper, were very helpful and compensating for the poor interview data.

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<sup>21</sup> by this I mean the proposed observation for my research that the editor-in-chief rejected. Otherwise, as mentioned earlier, I had previously in 2007 done two-week observation while working as an interpreter with the newspaper in a in-house training course run by two Swedish trainers who beside journalistic training focused a lot on cooperation among journalists in the newsrooms.

Another problem of this study is anonymity. Some people namely the editors in chief and chief news editors cannot be anonymous as it is easy to identify them through public documents if associate them with the time of my research.

In short, bearing in mind that the different investigation methods that I employed to study the two cases all have their own shortcomings which associate with both the researcher and the studied people, I believe I have got two quite rich cases that help me to answer my research questions.

#### ***2.4. A final note on journalist-turned academic approach***

Criticising the “first wave” news production ethnographers namely (Tuchman 1978) (Schlesinger 1987) “going native”, regaining “academic distance”, and “writing up the researcher's travelogue of journeying between the two” approach (Cottle 2000) says:

“in these 'new(s) times' of academic/journalist crossover, one surely cannot ignore the reflexive interplay between different disciplinary outlooks and cultural milieu. Important insights may yet emerge, for example, from those increasing numbers of academics-turned journalists, and journalists-turned academics that are able to reflect on their own 'reflexivity in this regard’”

Indeed, I believe that the direct experience as a journalist and the long term relationship, even friendship in many cases, that I have developed with the media activities and people is a valuable asset to gain an insightful picture of the news media - something that an "outsider" would not be able to obtain no matter how hard they try, considering the fact that Vietnam is a society where most activities extremely depend on unofficial, personal relations and trust (Kwintessential ; Smith, Esmond et al. 1996; Hakkarainen and Katsui n.a.), etc.

Bringing those insights into research papers is another issue. I understand that there are a lot of implications and possible problems.

First, because of the social norms and political atmosphere in Vietnam<sup>22</sup> (see more in chapter II and also different sources with keywords "self-censorship",

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<sup>22</sup> In Vietnam, people feel free to verbally discuss politics including corruption, power abuse and bad practices among high-profile politicians, but self-censorship, meaning they do not want to get in "unnecessary troubles" with their employers, cultural police, etc., as well as the vague law forbidding people to *disseminate information against the Party and the Government*, stop people's willingness to be quoted widely about their view. The self-censorship is even much more evident in the news media than other industries or fields.

"democracy", "political and media situations" in Vietnam such as the BBC, RFA (Radio Free Asia), etc.), most of my informants wish to be anonymous and what they say should be off-record. This certainly reduces the credibility of my thesis as concerned by many researchers who have experienced empirical and ethical problems with anonymous sources (see Briggs 1986; Arksey and Knight 1999; Oppenheim 2000).

Second, I understand that no matter how objective I try to be while examining and evaluating different aspects of this thesis, it is impossible to eliminate all my biases and even misinterpretations of the situations. However, highest efforts are made to separate the elements of my own description and analysis from documents and interview data.

Also, my long-time experience and involvement in the industry as well as my close relationship with its players could play a role of a double sword. On one hand, it gives me access and insights/understanding. On the other, it might make my thesis sound too personal. Or it might turn me blind to, or take some aspects for granted. Or I could unconsciously miss discussing something that is obvious to most Vietnamese (media) people but could be totally unknown or incomprehensible to foreign readers.

Having taking into consideration and acknowledged all the advantages and potential problems associated with bringing my personal experience into this research, I still believe that the advantages outweigh the problems as long as I am aware of and try to minimise the problems. This is confirmed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) who suggest five strategies to increase the credibility of qualitative research:

- activities for increasing the likelihood that credible results will be produced by a "prolonged engagement" and "persistent observation" in the field and the triangulation of different methods, researchers, and data;
- "peer debriefing": regular meetings with other people who are not involved in the research in order to disclose one's own blind spots and to discuss working hypotheses and results with them;
- "the analysis of negative cases in the sense of analytic induction;

- “appropriateness of the terms of reference of interpretation and their assessment;
- "member checks" in the sense of communicative validation of data and interpretation with members of the fields under study." (cited in Flick 2009: 392)



## CHAPTER IV: VIETNAMESE NEWS MEDIA STRATEGIES

This chapter presents the business and professional strategies adopted by Vietnamese news media in responding to the environment in terms of ownership, political censorship, budget cuts, etc. It answers my first research question about the media's strategies at industrial and organizational level.

The first section deals with strategies employed by news media in general from business and political perspectives. It describes the major markets, ownership and control issues as well as business models. For the chapter's cohesion, the external factors that lead to the strategies are presented according to those strategies. For a fuller political, economic and social picture of Vietnam where the media operate, see Appendix 1.

The second section discusses Vietnamese journalistic strategies and practices with a focus on the print news media. It provides the context for the examination of the two case studies in chapter V and VI.

It is found that Vietnamese news media are mostly following the international trends observed in the western literature discussed in chapter II in terms of economy and newswork. Integration of different kinds, convergence and the emergence of niche media, for instance, are the common trends. However, in terms of political control and ownership, due to the more or less "unique" political environment that they operate in, they have developed some interesting strategies that are not observed in the West.

### **1. Vietnamese news media's strategies**

#### ***1.1. Strategies to cope with political control***

Vietnam obtained its independence in 1975 and became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976 after a long history of wars. It is now one of the very few communist countries left after the fall of the Communist Bloc in Europe. In 35 years, especially since *Doi Moi*<sup>23</sup> in 1986, Vietnam has made a lot of achievements in all aspects. However, it is argued that the focus of Vietnam's *Doi*

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<sup>23</sup> *Doi Moi* (Đổi Mới) means Innovation or Reform.

*Moi* has been to press ahead with economic reform but advance more cautiously on the political front. Still, researchers see the Vietnam political system, state structure and media-government relation as changed almost beyond recognition since the beginning of the reform process starting in 1986 (Fforde and Goldstone 1995; McCargo 2004).

Vietnam has a dominating state, which stresses the core role of the Vietnamese Communist Party plus other official organisations and institutions. Therefore Kerkvliet (2001a; 2001b) believe that other groups and societal activities have little or no influence in the political system. However, the news media do play an important role in the political life, though probably differently from the way the media do in the West. This will be discussed later in this section.

As the development of the media in any society closely relates to the economic and political development of that society, the media development in Vietnam can be divided into five periods:

- 1975-85: *Country rebuilding, media as advocates and propagandists were under closed control both in terms of ideology and economy*
- 1986-89: *Doi Moi (Renovation) time- Economic liberalisation and political relaxation: Media as watchdog and corruption fighters*
- 1990-96: *Media under retightened control*
- 1997-2005: *Pre-WTO news media with both more freedom and control*
- 2005 till now: *Post-WTO: Media undergoing a lot of changes in terms of production and economy but still under closed political control*

Details about the changes in the society and media industry over the four decades can be found in Appendix 1.

According the current press law (Amended Press Law 1999), Ministry of Culture and Information was all media's administrator/authority. The ministry's Press Bureau (or Authority of Press) in fact was the main body that dealt with all the media platforms – issuing and withdrawing permission to establish news outlets and press cards, monitoring media content, etc. The Press Bureau then had a lot of administrative power in the industry.

However, as of December 2007, the government rearranged some ministries and the “information part” of the ministry was merged with posts and

telecommunication to become Ministry of Information and Communication (Decree 187/2007/NĐ-CP)<sup>24</sup>. From early 2008 Minister Le Doan Hop announced that the new ministry established four administrative bureaus to govern the news media: Authority of Press in charge of print news media, Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information in charge of broadcasting and Internet content, Authority of Foreign Information Services in charge of Vietnamese media overseas and foreign media/journalists' work in Vietnam as well as promotes Vietnamese values abroad, and Bureau of Information Security which basically can be understood as a monitoring organisation that "provides mechanisms to deal with those who publish false information" (Viet 2007).

The emergence of three more administrative authorities has raised concerns about the potential overlapping and confusion that might make it difficult for the media houses to operate, because most try to become multimedia corporations (interviewees 14,32, and discussions on journalistic forums).

From the Party's side, there is a Central Party Department of Ideology which is a close consulting body of the Central Party in terms of mass media, ideology, and culture, etc. and which closely monitors all the media's content and a special attention is given to the news media<sup>25</sup>. As it is a party-ruling country, the Ideology Department can be said to have much more power than the Ministry as the governor, especially now as no one from the Ministry (i.e. neither the minister nor his deputies) is a member of the Party Central Committee.

Every week on Tuesday morning there is a meeting between the Ideology Department's representatives and news media high-level representatives where warnings are given to the media outlets that have gone beyond written and unwritten limits, which are usually vague and elastic. Interestingly, it is observed that those news organisations that deliberately want to push the boundaries often choose to publish sensitive content just after the meeting, meaning they will have

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<sup>24</sup>Decree 187/2007/NĐ-CP signed by the Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung which came into force on 15 January 2008. see <http://mic.gov.vn/vbqpp/Lists/Vn%20bn%20QPPL/DispForm.aspx?ID=7020> last accessed 22 April 2011.

<sup>25</sup> See the Party's Decision on the Department of Ideology's function and duties on the Party's website at [http://www.cpv.org.vn/cpv/Modules/News/NewsDetail.aspx?co\\_id=30583&cn\\_id=148636](http://www.cpv.org.vn/cpv/Modules/News/NewsDetail.aspx?co_id=30583&cn_id=148636), accessed 22 April 2011.

a week before the next meeting for the issues to “cool down” and, thus, the sanction will be less harsh<sup>26</sup>.

Besides, there are “cultural police” who are from the Bureau of Information and Communication Security under Ministry of Police (official name: People's Public Security Forces)<sup>27</sup>. This cultural police force also monitors news media content. They could question journalists or basically anyone who discuss, either on the mass media or unofficial forums, matters that could be considered sensitive such as confidential discussions within the National Assembly or Party Congress about pluralism (interviewees 19, 29, 42, 47, 109)<sup>28</sup>.

All the above mentioned censorship or monitoring seem very serious, and in some cases it could be really serious and lead to arrests as mentioned below. However, the reality is believed to be much more relaxing. Usually only political journalists, and every now and then cultural or economic journalists, might be warned (interviewees 29, 109). Most journalists asked say they are not scared and they still push the boundaries if they could. It is said that the meetings with the Ideology Department are usually in an equal tone and the authority usually only gives hard warning if the case is considered huge. Cultural policemen are also said to be polite and respectful in most cases (interviewees 18, 29, 47, 48, 109, etc.). Therefore, self-censorship is more evident in Vietnamese news media, where everyone from reporters to editors and editors in chief makes their own decisions on what content should or should not cross the boundaries, which are vague, elastic and different from time to time depending on different authorities, and of course the last decision is made by the editor-in-chief or his representatives<sup>29</sup>.

Regarding the law; social, economic and technological changes have made Vietnamese press law and under-law regulations outdated. In late 2007 the government, represented by the Ministry of Information and Communication as news media administrator, started to evaluate the implementation of the amended

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<sup>26</sup> This information is provided by the interviewees who are editors-in-chief or their representatives at the meetings. The information is also considered a fact meaning known to every journalist in Vietnamese media context.

<sup>27</sup> see website [www.mps.gov.vn](http://www.mps.gov.vn) for the description of the ministry's offices.

<sup>28</sup> The information is also considered a fact meaning known to every journalist in Vietnamese media context. However, many journalists claim that they have never had any problems with the cultural police meaning never been summoned by them. Usually only political, cultural and economic reporters have more frequent contacts with the police.

<sup>29</sup> See note 19 and 21.

press law 1999. The Ministry proposed changes and hoped they would be approved by 2008. However, the approval process is still going on and it was believed to be delayed until the Party Congress took place in January 2011. It is noted that the bill was not open for public debates but only is discussed among the policy makers and lawyers. However, somehow the discussions have found their way to end up in the mass media and journalists' forums (see Phan 2008; Tran 2010).

The bill confirms that no private news media are allowed and that there is no pre-publishing censorship but publications must be deposited for reference after being printed. However, it tightens the responsibility to publish the news sources. It requires institutions and individuals to provide information to the news media and the news media to reflect the information correctly. It also requires that the sources be accountable for their information but it is not sure if the news media and journalists have associated accountability and if yes, how accountable they should be. This is of concern to individual journalists because the fact is, even when they only publish what their sources say they still are subject to civil and criminal charges if the provided information turns out to be false or defamative (Phan 2008; Mai 2009)<sup>30</sup>.

Another concern is that the new bill does not propose changes in terms of correction. The bill vaguely says: "In case the news outlet does not correct the mistakes and apologise the victim(s), the latter have the right to appeal to the media owning organisations and/or the media administrative organisations or start legal proceedings in courts" which might be interpreted that if they have already corrected and apologised, the victims have no right to appeal. It is well known and has been widely discussed among media professionals as well as the public that many news media publish false/incorrect information and then just have a sentence, most of the time hidden, saying "to correct" or "to restate" (Phan 2008; Phuong and Linh 2009).

The bill proposes that news media must deposit all their publication copies for reference two hours after being published, otherwise they will get a fine of 500,000 to 1,500,000 VND (17-50 GBP), which is widely criticised as a silly

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<sup>30</sup> Both of these authors are widely cited in the popular media.

condition because most dailies are released at around 2 or 3am when all the state administrative officers are... sound asleep (Phan 2008; Tran 2010).

There has also been criticism about the proposal of each news media organisation having an extra position called chairman above the editor-in-chief. That person's duty is not clarified and, thus, is interpreted as only the party and government's measure to better control the news media. Also, the bill suggests in order to be an editor-in-chief, one must have had worked as a registered journalist, i.e. been issued a press card, for at least 3 years; been in leading positions and received press management training, etc.

However, it is noted that, laws are not absolute and usually subject to interpretation and implementation. We will need to see how the under-law regulations interpret the new press law. Many cases seem to have proven the claim that in Vietnam, if there is something the government finds difficult to control, they will put a ban on it, meaning there will be an under-law decree or decision on that specific matter, or there might be some other equivalent measure. There is a list of confidential issues/information which is not allowed to be published by the news media. The only "slight" problem for journalists is that the list itself is also confidential! Some journalists even wonder if such a list ever exists.

Facebook is another case. It is believed to have developed beyond the government's ability to control and considered by the government to pose a danger to socialism and the party leadership. As it is not considered or registered as a news media outlet and, thus, not subject to the press law and regulations, firewalls have been set unofficially for a few years now. However, the people always find ways and it has become sort of an exciting hide and seek or chasing game between state and private IT experts. In fact, the alleged control over Facebook has been highly discussed and criticised as one indicator of the party and government's failure.

Overall, the government's governance of the media has always been criticised as behind the media developments<sup>31</sup>, which has some consequences/results:

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<sup>31</sup> Media governors themselves confirm this. Deputy Minister Do Quy Doan said in an interview with VTC reporter that "(Media) governors always have to pull ourselves to catch up with

- Slowing down the media's development, especially in terms of technology and economics. One example is pay television as mentioned earlier.
- On the other hand, this, together with the fact that there is no pre-publishing censorship, leaves space for media houses/journalists to push boundaries as regard to politically sensitive issues.

### ***1.2. News media's strategies to cope with ownership control***

Superficially, it would appear that news media in Vietnam are no more than an arm of the party and the state. According to the Press law (1990) all of the news media are "essential mass communication means serving our social life, and are the mouthpieces of the party, government, political-social or public organisations, professional associations and the people's fora", and no private media or foreign ownership are forbidden, basically meaning only central government or party, ministries, people's committees (city or provincial government), universities and associations are allowed to "own" news media.

However, the reality is far from that simple. On one hand, according to the Direction 37 "about the implementation of decisions made by the Polit-bureau on some measurements to reinforce the governance and leadership of news media" signed by the Prime Minister<sup>32</sup>, the government and party clearly confirm that no private news media will be allowed, and that "private-disguised news media are not tolerated" meaning private companies/people are "in no circumstances allowed to interfere with content or publishing process" while still able to be part

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development... We have to go with media development and support the media to develop". Another case is an interview (Anh, V. (2007). *Se lap them 3 co quan quan ly bao chi*. [VNExpress.net](http://VNExpress.net). Hanoi.

with the Minister of Information and Communication who says: "state governing bodies are 'chasing after' the strong development of the news media". The interview was originally conducted and published by VNExpress.net, one of the biggest online newspapers in Vietnam and republished by many other online newspapers and forums. However, it cannot be retraced on VNExpress.net now. It has obviously been removed, probably for political reason. However, the full interview can be seen at [http://www.tin247.com/se\\_lap\\_them\\_3\\_co\\_quan\\_quan\\_ly\\_bao\\_chi-1-84935.html](http://www.tin247.com/se_lap_them_3_co_quan_quan_ly_bao_chi-1-84935.html) and many other websites/forums.

It is noted that it is common that online newspapers or websites publish and remove articles afterwards for some reason, mostly political.

<sup>32</sup> available at the Library of Law at <http://www.thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Chi-thi/Chi-thi-37-2006-CT-TTg-thuc-hien-ket-luan-Bo-Chinh-tri-bien-phap-tang-cuong-lanh-dao-quan-ly-bao-chi-vb15728t1.aspx>

of other processes such as distribution or advertising (statement by the Deputy Minister of Information and Communication in charge of news media) (Minh 2007).

On the other hand, however, it is almost impossible for the government to control what Vietnamese journalists call “name lending”. According the press law, editors-in-chief and deputy editors-in-chief are appointed by the owning organisations, most of whom are political, social or public organisations, after the approval from the government. But in most cases of the media outlets established recently, a media organisation or its real owner, who pays to establish the media, proposes their leadership, and the government approves. Therefore, one simple way to avoid party control is “borrowing” an organisation which is politically qualified to be the name-owning organisation and also an individual who is politically qualified to be the editor-in-chief, and having the real work run by other (politically non-qualified) people. Or, in case a media house already has a qualified editor-in-chief and his deputies, it could just need a ministry or association to give their names as owning organisations (see more in Phan 2008).

VNExpress, the online newspaper mentioned above, is a special case that reflects the complex situation in media ownership in Vietnam. It was originally owned by FPT, which was a state-owned telecommunication company. When FPT became a shared company, because it is not allowed to have a private newspaper, VNExpress was “given” to the Ministry of Sciences and Technology. Thus it is officially owned by the ministry and “technically supported and administrated” by FPT. However, in reality, no change has happened: it still works as an enterprise that has partnership with other FPT branches and closely attached to FPT’s main shareholders who do not usually interfere with the content production (Eek and Ellström 2007).<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, another online newspaper, Vietnamnet was originally attached to or owned by a company under VNPT (Vietnam Posts and Communications Corporation). After several ownership changes, Vietnamnet now is owned by

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<sup>33</sup> However, it is noted that, in my view, the authors appear to have a very blurring picture of VNExpress in particular and Vietnamese media in general, probably due to little access, time, resources and also translation problems as they mentioned.



Ministry of Information and Communication but still run by the same management.

Regarding television, so far there are already some companies with foreign and/or private shares that provide the public with pay TV channels including news channels such as BBC, CNN, NHK, and are going to produce news. The issue is these pay TV companies, like many other print media, are usually run by outsourced personnel, not state-run staff, even though they might have an editor-in-chief who is qualified and approved by the government.

The press bill proposed in 2007 mentioned in the previous section (Phan 2008), despite reconfirming state and public ownership, legitimises the so-far-unwritten practice that news media collaborate with private domestic and international individuals and companies in design-layout, printing, distributing, marketing, etc., as well as producing non-political content, meaning basically all steps of media production except content that might be considered threatening to the power of the highest party and government.

In practice, therefore, ‘state ownership’ does not seem to have any real meaning, especially in case of print and online newspapers. It is not very difficult to establish a newspaper, as long as one has money and good relationship with the relevant media authorities, who will help with the application process, starting with finding an association, social organisation, etc. that can “lend” their name as the owning organisation of the media house (interviewee 4, 29, 105). This association or organisation does not usually interfere with the media production, unless something ‘wrong’ happens meaning the media happen to criticise the government or party, etc (interviewee 101). It is more difficult, though, to establish a radio or television station, because the government (i.e. the Ministry of Information and Communication) owns broadcast spectrums. However, most media organisations of this kind are those who are more commercialised, meaning they produce entertainment and soft news products rather than heavy political news. This fact explains why the government and party are more ‘relaxed’ with them.

In summary, the concept “no private news media are allowed” should be interpreted as “no private (or at all) negative political news items are allowed” and

“no coverage of corruption among high-level state and party officials is allowed” (see the discussion about corruption coverage and journalistic strategies below). Except for those, the news media are basically free to do what they want to such as compete with each other for audience and ads.

### ***1.3. Journalistic/professional strategies and practices to cope with political control, cost cuts and increased competition***

This section describes Vietnamese journalistic/professional practices and strategies and, therefore, both contributes to the answer to the first and second research questions and sets the context for the third research question concerning how *communication practices* in Vietnamese newsrooms’ affect the implementation or fulfillment of the strategies. It briefly examines the culture and processes of journalistic work in Vietnam.

In answering the second and third research questions, the next two chapters discuss the relations between journalists, journalism and newsroom structure and practices. Therefore, in this section, I will only give a brief description of the characteristics that may be most striking to international readers.

There are more than 16 000 registered journalists in Vietnam, defined as those that have a press card issued by Ministry of Information and Communication (interviewee 2). It is difficult to find out how many are really active, because administrative staffs of some media houses or journalism training institutions could also have press cards even if they never work as journalists. On the other hand, most news outlets use articles and news written by contributors who work in other fields than journalism. It is noted that the term “freelance journalists” did not exist, and still does not formally exist, due to the fact that, as mentioned above, journalists have to be registered as working for an official news media organisation.

According to Elmqvist and Rylander (2010), 85% of the registered journalists have a graduate degree, of which 40% from a journalist school and 60% from other graduate programmes; and the training they received is generally considered to be poor in comparison with Western standards. Retraining and further training has not been taken seriously by most news media houses, except some big

organisations namely Tuoi Tre, VNExpress, Lao Dong, etc. which, very recently, received support from foreign-aid programmes and realised training's impacts (see more in section about training below) (interviewee 4). The consequence is journalists' professional skills are generally poor, and in almost all cases, they have to learn from work which takes time and could be of high costs to the journalists themselves and their organisations when they make mistakes.

Media management is also poor with the majority of the managers never been trained to be managers (Toan, Thao et al. 2008). Differently from the West, because editors-in-chief and their deputies are assigned or approved by the government/party authorities usually on political merits, they are not necessarily good at management (interviewees 1, 3, 29). Quite a few (Tuoi Tre's editor in chief, for instance) even did not have any media background<sup>34</sup>. Middle managers namely heads or deputy heads of departments (content or otherwise), editors, chief news editors and their deputies, etc. are usually appointed or elected within the media organisation on the basis of their long time being with the organisation, their previous positions, their reputation/influence on other staffs with the latest implies their journalistic merits (interviewees 14, 16, 29, 42).

This last point is quite important. It is observed and my interviews with the confirm that in many media organisations, if someone who is not respected for their journalistic reporting skills, no matter how good their management skills are, by other journalists in the respective newsroom/department is appointed a manager, they will likely face much resistance and even opposition in their work which most of the time leads to bad consequences to the work relationship and, of course, final products. Tien Phong is a typical example. This will be discussed in details in the next chapter.

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<sup>34</sup> As the news media are considered the "mouthpieces of" and, thus, very important as a political tool the party and the state, editors-in-chief and key deputies are officially appointed by the owning organisations, which are most often political or public organisations (see section 2.2.2 about news media ownership), "after discussing with the authorities". In reality, the editors-in-chief and their deputies of most big socio-political media organisations are also politically active. In the more commercial media, whose content is less politically sensitive meaning more entertainment or lifestyle-oriented and who in fact run in a totally business manner, the editors-in-chief are usually appointed by the real owner(s) and approved by the official owning organisation who, in turn, obtain the approval from the media authorities.

### *Investigative journalism and fighting corruption: strategies to fight control*

Journalism perceived by most Vietnamese journalists is not very much different from the one pursued by most journalists in the world when it comes to news values such as relevance, currency, conflicts, etc. (see Braun accessed 20.10.2010). Most journalists interviewed also believe in their role as informants, educators, entertainers and watchdogs. However, there is a gap between what they think they should do and what they do or can do (interviewees 18, 47, 48, 51, 68).

Investigative journalism is probably where the difference shows the most clearly. The news media play a big role in the anti-corruption cause in Vietnam. Even though the majority of journalists only take journalism as just a job to earn a living there are some journalists who do not mind taking risks to report corruption and misbehaviours among high-level officials (interviewees 1, 7, 29, 47, 48, 53, etc.).

The pressure from WTO negotiations and later official agreements, other international treaties and organisations, as well as the internal pressure from within the society, has made Vietnamese government and CPV be, at least officially, more determined to pursue administrative reform and fight corruption<sup>35</sup>.

Just a few weeks after Vietnam entered the WTO in 2005, the government established the Anti-Corruption Committee which deals with citizens' complaints and which should research and propose anti-corruption measurements to the government. On the launching ceremony of the Committee, the media also received the assignment of continuing to contribute to the anti-corruption cause from a deputy prime minister (Tien and Tuan 2007). This assignment, which usually requires significant detachment and usually carried out by non-state media in other countries (McKinley 2009), is obviously a difficult task taking into account the fact that Vietnamese media are asked to uncover corruption within a power system where they are a part of. In such a context, 2006 was considered a

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<sup>35</sup> Since 1986 with Doi Moi (Renovation) Reform, Vietnam has always been struggling with administration hierarchy and fighting corruption, meaning power abuse among state officials thanks to loopholes in the legal and regulatory systems as well as the incentives for corruption resulted from a dual economy where planned and market mechanisms co-exist Gainsborough, M. (2003). *Corruption and the Politics of Economic Decentralization in Vietnam*. London, Routledge.

The news media's role in fighting corruption in the recent history can be found in Appendix 1.

prosperous year for anti-corruption in Vietnam in the general and the media in particular.

One big case is a widespread coverage short after the tenth Congress in April 2006, about the National Bank's decision to use polymer bank notes, where the former Bank Governor and his son were accused by the media as corrupt and taking bribes from an Australian company. The media also covered the scandal of the former governor in the purchasing deal of a state house, which led to the government annulling the deal (see Tien Phong, Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, VTC, etc. series of articles during October 2006).<sup>36</sup>

Another impressive case was so called "PMU", which was considered by domestic and international media at the time a great success of Vietnamese news media. Just before the X Congress, there was a widespread and strong media coverage of PMU-18 (a Project Management Unit under Ministry of Transportation) that led to the resignation of the Transportation minister and the arrest of the vice minister, both of whom were running for membership in the Central Party Committee, and many other government officials and high-profile policemen.

According to McKinley (2009), "anti-corruption coverage, especially of medium-size or large corruption cases, is carried out by a few large, urban newspapers and, within those papers, largely by a small group of high-profile reporters." This is understandable. These reporters and their high-profile newspapers not only have better skills and resources and better influence over the rest of the industry and the whole country's political system, but also are often the target for the informants, who surely understand politics and the media.

However, the fact is, when there is a big case, meaning corruption, power abuse or other misbehaviors among high-level figures or among lower-level people that might have connection with higher figures, usually the media play safe by sharing their materials with each other. The same situation applies when good investigative journalists at certain smaller newspapers discover potential big problems but do not want to take sole risk or, more often, are refused to be

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<sup>36</sup> The coverage also included a series of articles about similar purchases by many other officials of lower levels and led to a huge investigation into this issue by the government.

published at their own newspapers because of self-censorship (interviewees 17, 25, 29, 47, 48, 53).

Here, it is interesting to note that *professional sharing also serves political purposes, not only to obtain efficiency* by “getting work done” as observed by Tuchman (1978).

This, on one hand, can be considered a smart way to push the boundaries because certainly the pressure from public resulted from coverage by many media is much bigger than otherwise, which does not only forces the authorities to act but also reduces the risk of the media being cramped down. On the other hand, that kind of “collectivist reporting” implies possible misuse of unchecked materials fed by those who have personal interests in having some information published.

Sometimes it is not the question of reporting or not reporting or who reports a case, but how to report it and, in many circumstances, how to react when being “whistled”, – meaning given a warning by authorities. This is confirmed by a study by McKinley on how Vietnamese print newspapers’ covered the big corruption cases in 2006 and 2007 which shows that the stories themselves were not off limits to reporters but the newspapers whose journalists were arrested , editors’ press cards withdrawn and chiefs sacked “may have pushed their coverage beyond unspoken reporting boundaries.”

Probably due to the fact that southern news media are further from and, thus, less influenced by the political core in Hanoi, and that northern part is more heavily influenced by Chinese Confucianism why the south is more “American” due to the War (see chapter II, p 36-43), journalism in the south is widely considered by interviewed journalists as freer, more daring, more business and result-oriented while journalists from the north are a bit more political sensitive and feeling-oriented. It is also reflected even in writing styles. According to journalists themselves, the southern articles are straighter, explicit and more like a list of facts while the northern ones are more like literary pieces that give space for implicit interpretations.

However, I believe the gap is getting smaller and smaller as i) national or regional news organisations have offices and staffs in big cities everywhere in the country;

ii) they have been acquiring some common and quite international journalistic practices from international media and media trainers.

Still, generally speaking, it is observed that the more liberal media environment in the south has resulted in a little more trust to southern news and the audiences usually look to big newspapers such as Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, Phap luat TPHCM, etc. when there are big and controversial issues/cases in the society.

Media's corruption fighting could be looked at from a slightly different perspective. As mentioned in the previous part, the media play a significant role in Vietnamese political life. Usually about half a year to nine months before the Congress, the media start to be fed with a lot of information by oppositors within the Party to fight each other. This is probably the most exciting time for the news media, lasting for about a year every five year, before being cramped again a while after the Congress.

The information fed to journalists is usually off-record, as it is impossible to access the information without the help of insiders, due to the access limits discussed in the section about censorship. Therefore, quite a few journalists get into trouble after the Congress, many times one or two years after the Congress, when "the losers" are believed to regain their power and revenge. In the case of National Bank governor mentioned above, two years after the widespread media coverage, a number of journalists who were involved in the coverage were questioned by the police (with questions such as who were the informants, etc.), resulting in a "silent period" for these economic reporters. This has been discussed a lot among Vietnamese journalists as one of many "professional accidents" resulted from "the guys' revenge".

Similarly, in May 2008, journalists who wrote about corruption in PMU18 in early 2006 were questioned a lot by the police and two experienced reporters from the two biggest newspapers ("Tuoi Tre" and "Thanh Nien") were arrested and jailed on the charge "taking advantage of official position while pursuing duty" meaning reporting false information on the case. Two months later, some deputy editors-in-chief and chief news editors of the two newspapers had their press cards withdrawn because they had edited and published the articles with false

information as well as published articles strongly protesting the arrests. On the New Year Eve the two newspapers' editors-in-chief received a decision to leave their office from... the next day.

No one knows for sure what information in the articles was false but journalists say that it is true there were a lot of mistakes by the reporters about the case because a lot of information was off-record and not provable. They also admit that in many similar cases the journalists are only mercenaries, willing or not willing, for fighting forces within the high-profile guys, because otherwise there is no chance of obtaining information about corruption of those high-levels (interviewees 16, 17, 25, 29, 40, 42, 48, 53, 99).

This confirms McKinley (2009) who believes:

A number of constraints, ranging from poor access to information and legal protection to weak ethical and reporting standard, constrain journalists' ability to offer balanced and accurate coverage of corruption in Vietnam and limit the degree to which the media can play the anti-corruption role it has been assigned.

More currently, since early and especially mid-2010, a year before the Congress in January 2011, there was a lot of coverage about corruption allegations against high-level state companies and some middle-level figures in the power system, who of course were all believed to have connections with higher powers. Many cases such as alleged corruption, bribes, misbehaviours in state leading corporations such as Bank of Investment and Development Vietnam (BIDV), Vinashin (a state shipping corporation), Electricity of Vietnam (EVN), Ministry of Health and some big pharmacist companies, etc. were widely covered and received a lot of attention from the public, which led to investigations and work position suspensions. However, we need to wait until a while after the Congress to see how the media will be treated. Most likely there will not be much of change to the perceived scenario, which is: coverage of corruption by low or middle-level officials is welcome but that of misbehaviours by high profiles is not tolerated (also confirmed in McKinley 2009). In any case, after the retightening movements from the government/party authorities, the news media, generally speaking, have been much more carefully practising their role as corrupt fighters. This might send a bad signal about the nature of democratic environment in Vietnam. But, on the other hand, in my view, it could also be a good sign that journalists are more



careful in what they report meaning improved journalistic professional skills and ethics.

In short, there have not been big changes in terms of political influence upon the news media. Its sine wave has been the case since Doi Moi in 1986, meaning political control loosened and tightened consecutively corresponding with the Party Congress. However, the media's power has reached the middle level, i.e. it is considered safe to report power abuse and/or corruption of low to middle levels (some editor believes it is ministerial level as cited in McKinley (2007) and confirmed by some of my interviewees (7, 9, 17, 47, 48) who also, though, say it depends on other factors as well) in the country's power system. This, together with the media's own increased financial independence, the increased audience's autonomy, economic liberalisations, technological changes, and a much more overall relaxed social environment, promises more, not less, freedom for the news media in the coming years.

*“Envelope journalism” and doing PR to earn living*

Another big difference between journalism in the West and in Vietnam probably is what is called “envelope journalism”. It is uncommon that journalists do not receive an envelope with some money in it when they attend press or other conferences. “Receiving envelopes” is considered very normal in Vietnam and almost no journalists feel it is unethical. In most cases, the money is nominal and is explained as drink or transport reimbursement, not at all bribes or corruption. Most journalists asked also say the envelopes do not affect how they write about the paying organisations. However, receiving envelopes will be considered bad if they are “thick” and given to some specific journalists with the giver implying the journalists should write in favour of them (interviewees 1, 4, 7, 14, 16, 37, 42, 49, 99). There have been quite a few cases when journalists, usually economic writers, blackmail enterprises for a big amount of money; otherwise they would reveal the enterprises' problems such as tax flaws or wrongdoings, which are more common than not in business in Vietnam. During this research, for instance, one of the deputy newsroom chiefs of Tien Phong, who was also one of the active interviewees for this research, was arrested and jailed for years on this account.

The interviews with journalists (14, 16, 23, 29, 39, 57, 73, 99, 102) confirm that more and more journalists “do PR”. It is not that journalists switch their job to be Public Relations practitioners, which is also a trend, which matters. A lot of Vietnamese journalists, mostly mid-career, write PR articles for different businesses or NGOs and get them published in their own and other media. The prices the disguised advertisers have to pay vary but usually range from 500,000VND to about 50,000,000 VND (17-1700 GBP) depending on how big the items are; what news outlet they want - print, online, radio or TV; and the nature of the articles. In rare cases, when the businesses or organisations are in crisis, the prices can be whatever the media people want. However, there might be a gap between the amount the businesses or NGOs have to pay and the one that journalists/writers actually get, because there are a lot of spaces for commission for “middlemen”, meaning the staffs at the buyers’ office, and/or the journalists’ bosses, or someone who introduce them to each other<sup>37</sup>. It is noted that most “business affairs” in Vietnam are actually negotiated and done through personal relationships and under unofficial circumstances or environments such as bars, pubs or restaurants (Kwintessential ; Smith, Esmond et al. 1996; Hakkarainen and Katsui n.a.).

Journalists interviewed have different reasons for doing PR articles but the most common explanations are “we have to live, don’t we? Our salary is far from enough” (Interviewee 99); “Everyone else does it, why shouldn’t I? I think I am still much more ethical than many others” (Interviewee 17).

Because of the popularity of this practice, interviewed editors claim that their newspapers have to have their editors “sniff” all the articles very carefully and by regulations impose penalties on the journalists who do PR (interviewees 15, 32, 42, 64, 57, 103), but in reality it is not that easy to prove that they receive money to do so intentionally. In response, quite a few media houses including serious online newspapers and some print publications have to compromise by allowing some certain pages/areas to accept money (fix prices) from businesses who want to promote their products or companies. For instance, according to its editor-in-chief, VNExpress, which is considered to be number one online newspaper that

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<sup>37</sup> The research herself has experience in PR and media relations sector and, thus, has involved in this media buy practices. This practice is well-known and considered “a fact” by journalists and researchers.

have clean hands and which since the first days of operation had a strict policy of not accepting disguised ads, currently had to introduce a PR pricing system to a few of its pages such as “cuisine” or “travels”. The editor-in-chief explains that it is because it is extremely difficult to avoid “PR-sound” articles in the fields because one has to mention names of specific restaurants or places of interest; and by introducing the pay system, the newsroom can avoid individual journalists to take advantage of their job to make money and even possibly blackmail the businesses.

The situation could be even worse in some other online newspapers/websites where newsrooms have clear pricing systems for PR articles in almost all of their pages. The newsrooms also try to justify their policy with the same reason with VNExpress. One example is Vietnamnet, which claims to be a serious political-social online newspaper. Interviews with some Vietnamese editorial and sales staffs (interviewees 103, 111) confirm that Vietnamnet has a policy to publish PR articles in any of its pages for a fixed price of 3 million VND (100 GBP) to avoid individual journalists to get the money and the result is the editors have to “sniff” every article submitted by their reporters very carefully to find out if they want to make money from them. In addition, Vietnamnet, which is one of probably very few media houses that outsource all their advertising (named as such) sales to an outside company, also has a daughter company that specialises in PR and communication. Recently, a staff from a Chinese-based company called Innov Green circulated an email from Vietnamnet’s daughter company to them in which the PR company suggests a 1.8 billion VND (60,000 GBP) contract to publish articles to offset the Chinese company’s crisis. The latter also claimed that Vietnamnet verbally threatened to publish 10 negative articles about them if they did not accept the contract. In fact they did publish the 10 negative articles (PV 2010)<sup>38</sup>.

The story of this kind, and this size (systematic in the whole organisation), does not happen every day, but the practice of blackmailing businesses for money does exist among a few individuals and has been discussed a lot among journalists. My

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<sup>38</sup> For more information about this controversial case, see websites and forums such as <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/special-report/1644/innovgreen-tree-plantation-project-prompts-questions-in-lang-son.html>, <http://www.talawas.org/?p=22150>, <http://en.baomoi.com/Info/InnovGreens-weird-ideas/3/87925.epi>, etc.

observation from public forums is that the audiences also are much more alert to this type of articles. The newspapers that allow them, therefore, usually have bad names and are rated low in terms of reputation and public trust. Among journalists themselves there also is some sort of discrimination against those working for the “low ranked newspapers” even though the discrimination usually is based more on individual level.

Another version of doing PR in the news media is of course the well-known protocol news. This is no surprise because officially all the media are state-owned, so it is expected that high level state/party persons deserve front pages/headlines. However, this has become more and more of a self-censorship case where most media play safe by having (shorter and shorter) news items about the government/party important activities in front pages or as first few items in broadcast news bulletins. Some other common practices include unwritten rules namely: not publishing pictures of leaders as smaller than ordinary citizens on the same page, not publishing pictures of the national flag and/or Ho Chi Minh-side bank notes in articles with negative content, etc. (interviewees 10, 14, 15, 32, 39, 49, 57, 74, 79, 99, 103).

In case of broadcasting, many ministries and state organisations have deals with radio and television stations to produce materials on their demand, for instance traffic programme, culture programmes, country or industry promotion programmes, etc. (interviewees 1, 9, 57, 73, etc.) This is different from big serious print newspapers which are much more reluctant to PR materials. Still, they have to publish articles to promote some big national or local events or movements even if they do not believe the events are worth covering (interviewees 14, 32, etc.).

There is a professional code of ethics established by the Vietnam Journalists Association which is very general. Most media houses do not have their own code of ethics. Recently, under the influence of the Swedish media development programme, some big newspapers such as Tuoi Tre start discussing their own code. However, until now, nothing is fixed in this regard. The same situation applies for newsrooms’ internal stylebooks (interviewees 32, 33).

The newsroom structures and work flows, as well as news production practices and strategies will be discussed in details in chapters V and VI.

#### ***1.4. Business strategies to cope with budget cuts and increased production costs***

As mentioned in chapter I, from a fully state-subsidized sector, the majority of the news media have now become self-sufficient, only with the exception of the local party newspapers and radio stations. Even for the party newspapers and radio-television stations, the subsidies are being cut down sharply. Very few public and private organisations obey the Party's Central Committee's Decree 11 which forces them to buy Party's newspapers from the budget provided to them by the state simply because the state has cut down the budget so they have to be more selective (interviewee 9).

This, together with the fact that, i) the development of technologies which facilitates the emergence of new content providers, many of which are free of charge namely online newspapers with texts, web-TV and web-radio, social media; ii) changing audience and advertisers' behavior; iii) increased production costs, etc., have forced the media to develop different strategies to attract audience and sell content to compensate for the subsidy loss, to survive and make profits. For that sake, the issue of quality and efficiency has become more and more urgent (interviewees 14, 15, 22, 32, 49).

While the news media have developed probably unique strategies to cope with the political situation specific for Vietnam as discussed above, in terms of economy, Vietnamese news media reflect many of the world media trends which have reviewed in the literature (chapter II).

As mentioned in the literature review, media production is financially a risky business as the upfront costs are high. In order to offset the risks, media industries often apply some *strategies* such as advertising heavily; retaining a continuing link with consumers, understanding and shaping the market (Hesmondhalgh 2002). Media content changes from mass to niche and to participatory/peer (or interactive) models due to the increasingly active role of consumers (Kueng 2008). In order to make use of economies of scope and scale, the media have had many major structural changes: horizontal integration – owning many different

types of media products, enjoying labour and production cost reduction; vertical integration - expanding over different stages of the process of production and distribution and enjoying reduced transaction costs; diagonal integration – involving into new business areas to gain profits while making use of the same infrastructure, etc. (Doyle 2002)

Different Vietnamese companies are reacting in different ways though all are aiming at “doing everything” – a substitute term for “integration”, making the scene quite chaotic but interesting. The following text will look closer at the major sub-markets with a focus on the print media.

For the purpose of this thesis, the print media are analysed in much more details. The only reason for the brief discussion of the other sectors is to provide a general picture of the whole industry as a context to understand the print media practices.

#### *1.4.1. The Broadcasting Sector*

According to the Press Bureau, regarding public service broadcasting, there are two central (VOV-Voice of Vietnam and VTV-Vietnam Television) and 65 local radio-television stations. Besides, there are more than 600 local radio and relay television stations. All public broadcasting services are free of charge. There is no license fee or TV-set fee imposed on the audience.

VOV radio covers 95% of Vietnam territory but there is no available research showing how many people are its regular listeners. VOV radio broadcasts over 200 hours with over 200 programmes daily. It includes VOV News and Current Affairs; VOV Culture, Science and Education; VOV Music and Entertainment; VOV Ethnic Languages; and VOV Overseas Services for Vietnamese overseas and foreigners; and more currently VOV Traffic which quickly became successful because i) of traffic jams that could be considered ones of the worst all over the world, ii) it also broadcasts popular- music-on-demand at intervals, iii) it is the first and the only one of its kind in Vietnam<sup>39</sup>.

VOV also has online and print newspapers which are not very popular. In addition, VOV has VOV TV (which is newly developed and, thus, still in an

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<sup>39</sup> See VOV website <http://tnvn.gov.vn/>

infant status – criticised by many researchers and journalists as ‘radio on TV’s air’ meaning basically only sounds and poor-quality pictures that do not have anything to do with each other). So, like other media organisations, VOV is following the trend: everyone is doing everything, which in essence is horizontal integration as observed by western scholars (Corn-Revere and Carveth 1998; Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Doyle 2002; Kueng 2008: etc.)

According to journalists interviewed for this research, VOV seems the most different or least well-known in terms of journalism despite the fact that they also have news channel. This might be explained by the fact that not so many people in big cities listen to the radio except for car or taxi drivers who are usually more interested in VOV’s traffic or music programmes.

VOV does not have commercial competitors, probably because advertising revenues are far less compared to television due to the fact that most of VOV’s audience are from rural areas.

As regarding television, VTV reaches over 90% of the territory and more than 85% of the total population (17 million households) its satellite TV channel (DTH) covers all of Viet Nam<sup>40</sup>. VTV broadcasts free-to-air on 7 channels and is preparing to launch one more (interview 73). VTV4 reaches almost everywhere that overseas Vietnamese live. Unlike public service broadcasting in the UK and many other countries, Vietnamese free-to-air television is totally free (no license fee) and is allowed to have commercials. In fact, most of VTV’s revenues are from ads.

Beside the public service channels, VTV has established a now financially independent company called Vietnam Cable Television (VCTV) who, as of late 2010, broadcasts 61 channels on cables and satellite including the VTV’s 7 public service channels, 14 its own made and a few tens of foreign channels. VCTV’s own programmes focus on entertainment and “soft” news such as health, culture, etc. and some economic and educational, not political, news/information. VCTV, like VTV and any other media organisations in Vietnam, also produce some print publications such as magazines or journals, and broadcasts on the Internet.

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<sup>40</sup> Source: Press Bureau June 2010 (unpublished report prepared for Swedish media support donors) and VTV (report from General Director Vu Van Hien).

Another company, VTC, which has pay TV channels, online news, digital games, internet services and some magazines, was originally established also by VTV but now belongs to the Ministry of Information and Communication<sup>41</sup> and has become an aggressive competitor of VTV and VCTV. VTC has ‘slapped on VTV’s face’ (interviewees 10, 17, 100, etc.) by buying the sole right to broadcast big events such as World Cup, Miss Universe, etc. This has led to optimism among Vietnamese audience about a less-monopolist broadcasting system, because VTV had been the only player in TV, and the most politically powerful guy in the mass media industry of a country that has the culture of ‘nothing can happen before TV cruise comes’. However, VTC produces little news but focuses mostly on entertainment programmes, or produce channels/programmes on demands by government or social organisations that pay the company for the production costs, but not the air time or spectrum (interviewees 9, 57, 60).

Altogether, as of September 2010, there are five pay TV companies (VCTV, VTC, HCTV, SCTV, VSTV) that compete with each other while still cooperate in some aspects. All focus on entertainment but also do, or aim to, produce some non-political news (interviewees 1, 57, 79, 101).

The latest company VSTV, which owns brand channel K+, is an interesting case that raises a lot of debates and questions about monopoly and alleged corruption in television industry. VSTV is a joint venture between VTV, VTC and a French company called Canal Plus. On the other hand, VSTV is competing with VTC and VTV’s own brand VCTV as discussed above. Recently, VSTV beat VTV and other pay TV companies to obtain the sole right to broadcast the Barclays English Premier League and some other European sports games. This has created a huge protest from many Vietnamese viewers, who are subscribed to one of the other networks, because they might have to buy a new expensive pay TV package to see the games. It has also raised a lot of questions about possible corruption (because VTV owns both VCTV, SCTV and majority of VSTV while the price VSTV paid for the right was about ten times more expensive than the one VTV or VTC usually got in the past many years) as well as concerns about the public right for information and entertainment, or domestic state-owned companies fighting with each other resulting in international companies benefiting.

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<sup>41</sup> In 2015 its ownership moved to Voice of Vietnam (VOV).



The public concerns, through official mass media and forums, have been so strong that the Ministry of Information and Communication has had to jump in and organise a meeting with all pay TV companies, something that the Vietnamese companies themselves failed to do at the beginning which resulted in that expensive copyright. As a consequence, K+ channels will be added to the other pay TV systems and the companies themselves will have to discuss the terms. Most likely viewers subscribed to the competitors' networks will be able to see the games. The viewers appreciate the decision to jump in by the government, but obviously the pay TV companies, who allegedly use tax money (even though they do not receive subsidies from the state), are losing by competing with each other like that instead of cooperating to negotiate with the international sellers .

Pay TV is still a new field in Vietnam, thus the government is still very confused and struggling dealing with it. Anyway, the Ministry has just prepared a proposal for Regulations on Pay TV and is now waiting for approval from the central Government (interviewee 1). This, according to some TV high figures (interviewees 74, 102) has slowed down the development of the industry, because companies have been held off from producing or broadcast the programmes they plan to produce for years.

As such, the broadcasting sector has not faced reduced audience as in case of print, mostly because the lack of competition as mentioned in the previous section. However, in the last two-three years, as the revenues from television ads are too huge to resist, more and more companies are running to be part of the broadcasting team, starting with pay TV companies as discussed above. Besides, the toughest guys from print and online origins, who have or can obtain political influence or support<sup>42</sup>, are now also trying to increase economies of scale and scope by cooperating with television stations to produce content and, in turn, share profits from ads (An Ninh Thu Do for instance). Others, for example Phu Nu and Tuoi Tre, etc. try to reformat their journalistic and entertainment materials to video and audio-format in order to sell to mobile and television services. This phenomenon is quite new in Vietnam, but reflects the world's more established situations as described by many media economics authors such as Albarran, A. B.

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<sup>42</sup> Because the government owns spectrums.

(2002), Picard, R. G. (1989), Alexander, A., J. Owers, et al., Eds. (2004), Doyle, G. (2002), Goodwin, P. (1998), Hollifield, C. A. (2004), etc.

#### *1.4.2. The Online Sector*

Currently there are 34 online newspapers (of which only five are only online meaning they do not have any print or broadcast publication attached), 180 online versions of the print and broadcasting organisations, and thousands of “general information websites” run by state, party organisations, associations and businesses (Source: Bureau of Administration of Radio, Internet and Television, cited in (Dung 2010)<sup>43</sup>. The biggest online newspapers are those established and run by telecommunication or technological companies in their diagonal integration attempts, which is understandable because they have the advantages of technologies compared to their competitors.

Despite being ranked 3 or sometimes 4 in Vietnam in terms of page views, VNExpress is considered number one online newspaper with an average page view per day of 19 million and 12 million unique visitors (around 40 million visits)/30 days. It has a Google Page Rank 7/10, Traffic Estimate rank 113, Alexa world rank 264. According to Alexa, it has 5556 external websites linking to it. Its traffic volume limit is 100,000 per certain time.

VNExpress is considered a serious newspaper although it has been criticised by many Vietnamese journalists as “standing outside political life”, meaning its strategy is not involving in fighting corruption and power abuse like other newspapers. The fact is that VNExpress’ policy is to deliver fast, accurate and objective news, not commentaries (interview 64). Therefore, for instance, when there is a hot alleged corruption in question, VNExpress usually only covers developments of court proceedings while some aggressive newspapers would comment on them.

VNExpress has a total staff of 170 including 90 journalists producing 120-200 items a day, of which 80% are news items and 20% are features, for four different

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<sup>43</sup> All websites open to public in Vietnam are registered and the owners need to apply for permission to run. “General information websites” are defined as those that cite information published in other media and information about their own organisations/companies. They are now allowed to produce journalistic content.

online platforms/sites. Another 300 published items are audience's comments, feedbacks, and classified advertisements. Its income is from advertising only (interviewee 64).

Another online newspaper is Vietnamnet. It has a global Alexa traffic rank of 1,184. The site's audiences are disproportionately both high- and low-income men aged under 25 and over 65 who browse from school and have no postgraduate education (interviewee 103). The site's visitors view 6.5 unique pages each day on average. Approximately 59% of VIETNAMNET's visitors are in Vietnam, where it has attained a traffic rank of 11. The time spent in a typical visit to it is roughly eleven minutes, with 68 seconds spent on each pageview (Alexa 2010).

Vietnamnet has a total staff of 242 including 192 journalists producing content for nine online publications (interviewee 103). Vietnamnet is considered a bad mix of "stupid rubbish" and very "daring serious news and commentaries". Therefore, the discourse on public and journalistic forums show that, the audience on one hand complain about its silly mistakes and bad taste stories but still look to it when they want to read about hot political issues happening in the society on the other hand.

Another popular online newspaper is Dan Tri, which focuses more on light and entertainment news.

Online newspapers attract more and more readers and, thus, more ads with their 24/24 update policy which is of great advantage compared to the print. However, their fast-speed reporting has bad consequences, to be discussed further later in the section about journalists and journalism.

The competition for audience has made traditional print newspapers invest in and develop their online newspapers/versions even though the investment poses a loss at the beginning, a trend also observed in the west.

Compared to the print papers/version, online newspapers are somewhat more daring or boundary-pushing in their coverage. This could be explained by the fact that it is much easier to remove or change some content if it attracts warning from authorities or the public. But the bad side is it encourages careless behaviours among journalists who tend to favour speed than thorough double-check journalistic practices (interviewees 22, 29, 51). A lot of complaints have been

found about the quality of online newspapers in Vietnam. The only exceptions are VNExpress (see Eek and Ellström 2007) and the online version of some serious print newspapers such as Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong, Lao Dong, etc.

#### *1.4.3. Vietnam News Agency (VNA)*

VNA is a national news agency owned and run by the government, together with VTV and VOV. Its explicit goal is to reflect the Communist Party of Vietnam and Vietnamese government's view on big current affairs in Vietnam, region and over the world.

In reality, beside the mouthpiece's role, VNA's 3000 staffs also deliver journalistic work like many other news agencies in the world. It has correspondents and/or offices in all 63 Vietnamese provinces and cities, as well as 27 overseas bureaus across the five continents. It has bilateral and multilateral cooperative relations with 42 foreign or international news agencies and media organizations. It is a member of several international news organizations, including the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool (NANAP), the Organization of Asia-Pacific News Agencies (OANA), and the News Agencies World Congress (NAWC).

Like other big news media organisations in Vietnam, VNA aims to be a multimedia corporation, confirming the integration trend in the west.

Beside the wire and mobile services in Vietnamese, English, French and Spanish, VNA also has an online newspaper and a few tens of print newspapers and periodic publications, some of which actually are "name borrowed" as discussed in section "media ownership". For example, "*Sports, Culture and Men*" and "*Beauty*" are in fact run (and owned unofficially) by Le Media, a PR company, whose boss says the two publications account for a majority of the company's revenues (interviewee 101).

Most of VNA's leaders were members of the Communist Party Central Committee until nearly two decades ago<sup>44</sup>. From then, VNA's political power has been decreasing a lot, and so is its influence on the rest of the media industry

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<sup>44</sup> In January 2016, the head of VNA became a member of the Party Central Committee

(interviewee 88, 90)<sup>45</sup>. All other media still have to buy VNA's wire service, but, except for local party newspapers, most big news outlets choose to do their own news or use international services such as AFP, Reuters, etc. rather than the VNA's (interviewees 1, 15, 16, 32).

However, when it comes to very sensitive issues, the other media houses still receive often oral messages from the authorities, mostly Central Party's Department of Ideology, that they should "publish VNA's news", meaning VNA is still considered 'official informant'. During my fieldwork in one of the two case studies discussed in chapters V-VII, I saw several times the editor-in-chief, who was attending the weekly meetings with the Central Party's Department of Ideology, ring his editors at home to "do it VNA's way".

VNA is widely considered by journalists, including its own, as a terribly bureaucratic organisation, and a very conservative and closed-minded body that has long been sleeping on its "big man" status. However, the last few years have seen new younger editors, who received education and training abroad, be promoted to some key positions in different departments which has brought hopes, and some clear positive results, to their publications.

Beside the strategies to survive economically and to make profit that are similar to those employed by the Western peers, the news media also have some other practices which are specific for Vietnam.

According to the current law (1999), "news media organisations are allowed to do business and provide added services to obtain incomes that will be reinvest in news production". However, the government believes that "many news organisations do not separate their service/business part from the content production" (Interviewee 3/ 26.5.2011). This might be due to the fact that the government is still struggling with news media business model, and has not yet decided whether news media should be "state service delivery organisations", "income-earning service delivery organisations" or enterprises (Minh 2007). This makes it difficult not only for the media in their finance arrangement, but also for

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<sup>45</sup> See Appendix 1 for detailed discussion about the political system in Vietnam and its influence on the media.

the government to regulate the media. The mixing of journalistic and business work also raises a lot of concerns about conflicts of interest among both journalists and audience (interviewees 14, 22, 29)

As it is now, most self-financed news media consider themselves as state-owned businesses or enterprises. But the fact is, except for some big online news outlets that really run like businesses which have much more space to move than their state-run mates in terms of money, most print newspapers and broadcast outlets do not really pay taxes<sup>46</sup> and have a full right to their profits as businesses do (interviewees 1, 14). This means they have to pay in the government's budget according to what they earn, but can keep some profits for their own use. However, they still have to allocate their budget according to the state's regulations and their permanent staffs' basic salaries are paid by the state. This, which is a common problem for all kinds of institutions in Vietnam, makes it very complicated to deal with payments because many of the state regulations do not reflect the reality of life, meaning everyone is forced to "lie" or be "illegal". For instance, let's say a newspaper has plenty of money, wanting to hire a foreign trainer for a one-week training course for their journalists. The trainer's rate is 1000 USD/day. The interpreter's rate is 200 USD/day. The result will be a one-week course by that trainer in reality, but on paper contract it will appear as a three-week course with that foreign trainer and two interpreters, to fit the state regulations that apply for state organisations. The same situation applies to all other kinds of payments, which leads to a dual book system – one official account for report to the state and public, if necessary, and the other is internal account which is the "real one".

#### *1.4.4. The Print Sector*

For the purpose of this thesis, this section will be of focus. Therefore it is presented as a main section below.

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<sup>46</sup> Some big organisations, such as Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien, who are among those allowed by the government to test the "corporation model", pay taxes according to the Law on Income Tax for Enterprises, which is believed to be too high by some editors in chief. Other smaller newspapers still work as state service delivery organisations, meaning all the ins and outs have to be done according to the state's regulations.

## 2. The print news media's strategies

The print publications have been so far the main driving force for uncovering power abuse and corruption as discussed in the section about the organizational business and professional strategies to cope with censorship/political control. Other strategies concerning ownership, envelop journalism and PR practices as means to earn living among journalists surely also apply. Therefore, *the following text will only discuss the print media's organizational business and newsroom operational strategies to survive and develop economically and professionally.*

### 2.1. Some background about the print news media

According to the Press Bureau<sup>47</sup>, which is the administrator of the print media houses, as of May 2009, Vietnam had 706 print media agencies, including 76 central/national<sup>48</sup> newspapers, 102 local newspapers and 528 journals and magazines, producing more than 900 publications (interviewee 4).

The market for print media can be divided into market segments: serious political and social newspapers, which are generally national dailies; special interest, which are usually periodic or journals that focus on some special field; and “cuop, giet, hiep” (“robbing, killing, raping”, which are tabloids full of celebrities and “cuop, giet, hiep” stories. Many of the “cuop, giet, hiep” type are newspapers owned by the police. Therefore, these journalists have first access on the legal cases.

Print media organisations can also be categorised by circulation-size: big newspapers – circulations above 100,000 copies, middle newspapers – circulations between 40,000-100,000 copies and small newspapers with circulations of less than 40,000 copies (interviewee 21). As it is now, only a few can be called “big”. The majority of dailies belong to the middle range group. Tuoi Tre is considered the biggest serious newspaper with a claimed circulation of

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<sup>47</sup> Current official name: Authority of Press, which is the administrator of the print media

<sup>48</sup> National means those that are distributed nationally or, more correctly, also outside their headquarter base. Staff of many newspapers labelled ‘national’ by the Press Bureau still wonder if their newspapers are national, regional or local, because most content is local (big city/cities) news and most copies are sold locally or regionally, although some copies can be present in most other parts of Vietnam.

around 400,000-470,000. Tien Phong, the second case study, belongs to the middle group with an official/claimed circulation of 70,000-150,000<sup>49</sup>.

The following table shows the leading print publications in Vietnam in terms of claimed reader reach (not the circulations)<sup>50</sup>.

**Figure 8: Top prints with rating of 9.0% or higher (claimed readers)**

*Source: TNS (obtained through Tien Phong newspaper in January 2010 with no further explanations of the data and methodology.)*

N o	Publication	Claimed readers %	Regular readers %	Periodi- city	Centre of Interest <sup>51</sup>	Claimed circula- tion
1	Tuoi Tre newspaper	34.2	22.9	daily	General	
2	Cong An TP HCM newspaper	33.6	26.9	2 weekly	Society	
3	Thanh Nien newspaper	25.6	15.0	Daily	General	
4	Tiep thi va Gia dinh magazine	24.0	16.1	Weekly	Woman and lifestyle	
5	An Ninh The gioi	20.2	14.4	2	Society	

<sup>49</sup> The numbers 400,000 and 70,000 were provided by the newspapers during my fieldwork in late 2009 till mid-2010. As of May 2011, the published numbers of the papers are 470,000 and 150,000 copies respectively. However the 150,000 number appears to be too exaggerated, taking into account the situation of Tien Phong less than a year before. I would not, though, dispute it. Nevertheless, according to my key informants in the field who I keep close contact with on day-to-day basis, recently there has been no change in the widely perceived ranking of the dailies, meaning Tien Phong is still considered "second-class" or middle newspaper in terms of circulation.

<sup>50</sup> The claimed only media research company in Vietnam (TNS) only has the information about the newspapers' claimed reader reach (out of the total national population).

<sup>51</sup> The term "general" used by TNS here in this table is understood by most Vietnamese journalists and many readers as "economic, political and social" or "serious". The "Cong An" (police) or "An Ninh" (Security) newspapers/magazines are often called "cướp, giết, hiếp" (robbing, killing, raping) by the journalists as the newspapers are owned and run by the police and, thus, usually have quick access to the police files (see Appendix 1).



	newspaper			weekly		
6	Cong An TP HCM magazine	19.9	14.6	Weekly	Society	
7	Bong Da (Football) newspaper	18.7	11.6	Daily	Sport	
8	The gioi phu nu (TP HCM) magazine	18.5	11.4	Weekly	Woman and lifestyle	
9	The Yellow Pages	15.8	15.8	Annual	Directory	
10	Tuoi Tre Cui magazine <sup>52</sup>	13.5	7.3	2 monthly	Society	
11	Hoa Hoc Tro magazine	13.4	9.8	Weekly	Students	
12	Dat Mui Cui Tuan magazine	11.6	6.8	Weekly	Entertainment	
13	Cong An Nhan Dan newspaper	11.4	5.4	Daily	Society	
14	Hanh Phuc Gia Dinh (Phu nu Viet Nam) magazine	9.8	5.7	Weekly	Woman and lifestyle	
15	Phu Nu Chu Nhat magazine	9.7	5.8	Weekly	Woman and	

<sup>52</sup> This magazine (the word "Cười" means laughing) is better categorised as "comedic" rather than "society" as it is totally different from other "society" newspapers in this table. The magazine is an additional publication of Tuoi Tre. It, in a humorous way, discusses both serious and light-hearted issues in the society.

					lifestyle	
16	The Thao Hang Ngay newspaper	9.6	5.8	Daily	Sport	
17	Muc Tim magazine	9.6	6.6	Weekly	Students	
18	An Ninh Thu Do newspaper	9.5	6.4	Daily	Society	
19	Phap Luat TP HCM newspaper <sup>53</sup>	9.3	3.4	Daily	Law	
20	Thoi Trang Tre magazine	9.0	6.0	3 monthl y	Woman and lifestyle	

As the table shows, almost all the print publications that sell the most are those that are specialised in certain topics of interest and aim at certain reader fragments. Most of so-called serious newspapers have smaller circulations and are facing more financial difficulties due to reduced advertising.

Newspapers usually announce higher circulation numbers to attract advertisers. Very few people in each media house know the exact numbers. However, there is a general unwritten "perception" or "agreement" among journalists and media-related practitioners and authorities about the ranking (or "classes") of the news publications and, thus, likewise, of most of their staffs, which is based on a blurred mix of seriousness, professionalism (which is a vague term too), political and social reputation, circulation/readership, and financial situation.

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<sup>53</sup> As far as I know, this newspaper should be categorised as "general" as it also covers general topics (e.g. education, society, economy, etc.) other than legal issues although the newspaper's tone is noticeably different from the other "general papers" as it originally indeed was a newspaper that focused on legal issues. The last decade sees that this newspaper has been one of the most advanced in discovering and publishing anti-corruption materials about the government and commercial companies and, thanks to these published materials, its circulation and readership have increased sharply placing it in the "first-class" or "big newspaper" list.

It is observed that there is an interesting conflict/dilemma in the way so-called serious newsrooms and journalists perceive the others. They on one hand tend to look down on so-called "tabloid" or "yellow press" practices, meaning in fact all the entertainment and lifestyle papers and their journalists, including those more or less reputed in "the serious category" but leave for the less serious ones. On the other hand they want to sell like the tabloids, meaning compromises are needed as part of business strategies discussed below.

## ***2.2. Print news media strategies to survive and develop economically and professionally***

As discussed in chapter II, print newspapers' circulation, readership and penetration are all decreasing (Willis 1988; Picard 2003; Price 2006). Many newspapers are disappearing (WAN 2007).

In Vietnam the number of print publications is not going down but, in fact, increasing. However, the recent economic crises as well as WTO agreements have resulted in increased paper and ink prices. Because of the increased competition from other media, especially online news which is free for audience, for readership and advertising, the print publications do not want to increase the paper selling prices while still have to consider reducing ad rates and investing in new distribution channels and/or other content platforms (interviewees 14, 32, 55). Also, the advertisers are getting more and more skeptical about the cost effectiveness of print ads. This has put a lot of pressure on print publications, a totally different picture compared to 10-15 years ago. According to the interviewed editors in chief and/or their deputies, in the period 2008-2009 almost all print newspapers' circulations drop sharply, in some cases to less than half, which parallels with a big drop in advertising (interviewees 2, 10, 14, 32, 106, 107). From the beginning of 2010 the bigger newspapers' circulations have been recovering but are still far from their peak times (interviewees 32, 108). The situation is even much worse for small newspapers which already have had too few ads and have had to live on cover sales.

The industry has responded by cost-cutting and consolidation. The last few years have seen more and more big newspapers restructure themselves (WAN 2007).

The strategies included cooperative arrangements, varying content and products formats to reach more audience, specializing content, changing presentation of news, providing more analysis in the efforts to differentiate themselves with the competitor television, change of protocol, running online versions; offer free commuter newspapers, building trusted relationship with their readers, market fragmentation, cost-cutting, etc. (Doyle 2002; Tuchman 2002; Aris and Bughin 2005); content upgrades, special supplement and magazines, promotional offers of books, CDs, DVDs, free subscription trials, improved home and newsstand distribution (Kueng 2008). Most recently, convergent newsrooms are becoming the norms (WAN 2007; WAN 2008).

Similar trends are found in Vietnam.

#### *2.2.1. Horizontal Integration of Content: diversified versus fragmented*

Unlike the broadcasting system, which is almost a monopoly in Vietnam due to spectrum issues (see more in Appendix 1), sole online newspapers (established on their own solely or initially as online newspapers instead of starting with a print paper as a core product and having online versions) which, as mentioned earlier, are much fewer and are usually owned by internet or other kinds of business companies and, thus, have the advantages of the owning companies' technology and/or financial and specific-profession resources, print newspapers have to cope with much more competition in their traditional market of nearly a thousand publications over the whole country, as well as struggle with their competition in the new online market. Except for those that still are subsidised fully or partly, all the newspapers have to develop strategies to survive, but strangely enough, the number of players is nowhere near decreasing. Nor any print newspapers have died. In contrary, it seems there are slowly more and more publications.

Internationally, newspapers's strategies have included cooperative arrangements, varying content and products formats to reach more audience, specializing content, (Doyle 2002; Tuchman 2002; Aris and Bughin 2005); content upgrades, special supplement and magazines (Kueng 2008).

There is a continual weakening of mass market model and an increasingly active role for consumers, or in other words the "demassification and emergence of the niche media". (Kueng 2008).

The most general trend applied to all the news media, which in the case of serious newspapers, is the switch from politically heavy topics at macro to much more micro levels, and lifestyle and human interest topics, everyday life stories, entertainment are in focus (interviewees 1, 3, 14, 15, 32, 64, etc). This situation is similar to the one during the late 1980s (see Appendix 1), but of a higher level of “yellow press”. Beside the content topics, the tones and language uses are also going to the same direction.

Besides, focusing on seasonal news has still been a strategy to increase circulation. For instance, before and during the school and university yearly entrance examination period, most newspapers devote a big part of its content to, and/or even print supplementary publications with sample tests, knowledge reviews, etc. Some newspapers even distribute posters/news bills to school students and parents so they can order the special issues.

In terms of content, it is observed that there are three main extremely clear trends; the first two seems to be contrasting- one supports and the other challenges Kueng’s observation:

- i) *Narrow-subject-field papers*<sup>54</sup>: diversifying content subjects, which is difficult as the publications’ names are too narrow which might mislead and/or mentally affect the potential readers’ decision to buy and consume them. Successful stories as perceived by many interviewed journalists include the “Rural Today”, owned by Vietnam Farmers Association. With the new editor-in-chief who was brought in from Lao Dong (“Labour”), a general interest serious daily

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<sup>54</sup> As mentioned in chapter II, all the news media in Vietnam were owned and run by the government of different levels, state-own and public institutions and associations/unions and, thus, served as the mouthpieces for the owning organisations. Therefore, naturally, the content of the publications were subject or field-specific, for instance “Rural Today” owned by Vietnam Farmers Association, “Transport and Communication” by Ministry of Transportation, “Post” by the National Post, “Veterans” by the Veterans’ Association, etc. Nowadays, all news media are still officially registered as owned by the same kinds of institutions and no private media are allowed. However, more and more business-like media, almost all of which are for commercial purposes rather than having politics in mind, have been being born and these publications are disguisedly registered as owned by the institutions but in fact have little direct contacts with them except usually only some financial contributions to the institutions’ (and their bosses’) budget. Therefore, the previous narrow-subject publications either become internal bulletins of the owning institutions or need to change if the owning organisations stop sponsoring or cut down subsidies and they do not want to die out as, naturally, very few readers would be interested in buying such publications considering so many choices they have nowadays. To make the matter worse, in fact, probably due to Vietnamese customs and mentality as well as the difference between “family relationship” and “money or partners’ relationship” (see more in chapter II), these publications have much less autonomy being “blood children” compared to the newly born publications which could be considered “borrowed or disguised children” of the owning organisations.

once being one of the most popular and prestigious dailies in Vietnam, “Rural Today” has been trying to find a way to develop out of their farming and farmers’ interests. Its content has been diversified and become more or less like other general interest dailies. However, the editors believe its sales and advertising are, though slowly increasing, limited by the newspaper’s name. Their next solutions include having a general interest online publication called Dan Viet (“Vietnamese Citizens/people”). By doing it, “Rural Today’s” leaders reportedly avoid upsetting the Farmers Association and hope that they will be able to make profits with Dan Viet while making use of Rural Today’s resources (interviewee 112).

- ii) *Already established newspapers (most of which are general interest)*: while still keeping and trying to develop the core product, more and more of these organisations are establishing new publications or supplements, magazine-type, that target fragmented groups of audience, most often women of certain ages and/or income levels, men of certain ages and/or income levels, teenagers, or specific interests namely golf, cars, motorbikes, fashion, etc. With the core products, the organisations usually keep the content and tone line, i.e. prestigious serious newspapers still keep to be serious in their main approach, as they do not want to lose their serious readers and their reputation as serious political-social newspapers and as they are much more likely to be “whistled” by the politicians and/or their owning organisations compared to magazines/supplements and already established police newspapers which right from beginning have been focusing on crimes (interviewees 21, 32, 49).

Tien Phong has a daily print paper, an online paper, four magazines and a print advertising supplement that is attached to the daily every Tuesday.

Of the four magazines, two existed before, but two are new after the editor-in-chief came to his office and conducted the staff survey which showed the staffs' discontent or bad evaluation toward the other publications than the daily, as well as saw that the circulations were not good and decreasing. The new two magazines replace the previous monthly and weekly Tien Phong. The idea was to redefine the target audience.

In other words, according to the editorial board, the strategy is changing from the idea of "(Tien Phong) brand expanding" like in case of the weekly and monthly Tien Phong to the idea of "brand diversifying".

This involves developing content for target audience "demographics". The former Weekly and Monthly Tien Phong's audience were not clearly defined and the papers were just made with the hope to sell more products to any customers while the two new, Nam Cham ("Magnet" monthly, 128 pages) clearly targets men over 20 years old and Lua Am ("Warm Fire", monthly, 128 pages) aims at married women. The two existing ones, Nguoi Dep ("Beauty" or "Beautiful Women", fortnightly, 104 pages) and Tri Thuc Tre ("Young Knowledge", 3 times a month, 100 pages) also have redefined targets being young women over 20 and families respectively. Only Tri Thuc Tre, aims at lower income earners as its copy price is only one fourth of the women's magazines and one sixth of the one for men. Thus, Tri Thuc Tre is printed in lower quality papers while the other three are printed colours in good quality paper like Western glamorous magazines.

In terms of content, all the four magazines including Tri Thuc Tre ("Young knowledge") which Tien Phong claims to aim at families, are following today's market trend, meaning all their content is light-hearted, human interest, lifestyle and more or less sensational or, in Vietnamese way, "cướp, giết, hiếp" (robbing, killing, raping).

For instance, the first renewed Tri Thuc Tre's issue published in September 2010 has the following main articles: Men's health measurements<sup>55</sup>, Losing weight by hypnosis, Three western medicine doses mean less than a serve of fried intestine, Me and him, Home garden medicines, Ten myths about drinking water, Testicular torsion, Women sexual problems, Couples' private stories, Left-handed child, Digital age adultery, Mutants, Die for love, etc. Previously, Tri Thuc Tre offered educational content with common knowledge articles in a much more serious way.

The other magazines cover stories and pictures about celebrities, rich and successful people and their business and private lives. These magazines seem to copy the style of The Thao Văn hóa và Dân ồng ("Sports, Culture and Men",

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<sup>55</sup> implying sex health

generally more known as only "Men") and Dep (Beauty) - two probably first "private-disguised" magazines in Vietnam which have been considered very successful<sup>56</sup> and, thus, serve as the private-disguised ownership model for many other media players to follow (see more in chapter II and in section 2 above).

So far the two older magazines have not brought much profits and the new ones (one was released late 2010 and the other first quarter 2011) still incurs losses but Tien Phong's leaders hope that they will cover their own costs after one year.

iii) More and more *private disguised publications are born* (see also the section about strategies to cope with ownership control above). These are usually magazines financially owned and totally run by private communication companies<sup>57</sup> but are registered as owned by state-owned or public institutions, associations and especially established news media organisations. In the latter case, the magazines would be called "supplement of X newspaper", for instance. The newspaper that officially owns it does not usually involve with the production but receives its financial shares. Some examples of this kind of publications are:

- Dat Viet (Viet Land) (this is a newspaper, not a magazine like the others),
- LifeStyle, Golf,
- Gia Dinh Tre (Young Family)
- Sanh Dieu (Stylish)
- Dep (Beauty)
- Dan Ong (Men)
- Kien Truc (Architecture)
- Thoi Trang (Fashion)

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<sup>56</sup> The first, Dan ong, is officially owned by The thao va Van hoa (Sports and Culture) Newspaper which itself is owned by Vietnam News Agency. The latter, Dep, is registered as a supplement of Vietnam Pictorial Newspaper which is also owned by Vietnam News Agency. Both of the magazines are in fact owned and run by Le Media, one of the most popular communication company whose business covers news publications production, e-media, book publishing, television production, advertising, entertainment and game shows, etc. Officially Le Media is registered as the magazines and other publications' advertising and distribution sole agent as no private media are allowed in Vietnam.

<sup>57</sup> Most of which also produce other media products especially television products such as games shows, films, talk shows, documentaries, etc.



- Tiep Thi va Gia Dinh (Marketing & Family)
- Dang Yeu (In Love),
- Canh Sat Toan Cau (Global Police)
- Phap luat va Cuoc song (Laws and Life)

Some of these magazines are believed by many journalists to serve money laundering purposes as they are backed with huge amounts of money, especially a few that incur financial losses for as a long time as a few years continuously (interviewees 29, 99, 103). However, most of them sell very well. For example the last three magazines mentioned above, officially registered as supplements of different newspapers but in fact owned and run by one private company. “Dang Yeu”, for instance, sells more than 100000 copies per issues just after less than one year published. Another version of “Dang Yeu” is going to press soon (interviewee 99). If one goes to a market<sup>58</sup> one would see that almost every seller are reading Dang Yeu and discuss it with the others.

The last three publications, and some other magazines run by other news organisations are the newest in the market and offer juicy and sensational materials such as killing of love, wife cutting husband’s “family happiness”, strange crimes, world’s miracles, etc., many of which are pure fictions<sup>59</sup>, and target lower incomers while the others, which started earlier, target middle or higher earners with more sophisticated tastes. As such, it is quite clear that the magazine trend in Vietnam is switching from targeting middle and high income audience to lower income earners, probably as the earlier market is getting mature while the latter is still huge considering Vietnam’s overall economic situation.

#### *Content presentation and layout strategies*

Print newspapers are changing presentation of news, providing more analysis in the efforts to differentiate themselves with the competitor television (Doyle 2002; Tuchman 2002; Aris and Bughin 2005).

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<sup>58</sup> A Vietnamese typical market is totally different from supermarkets. It is usually poor-looking with individual stalls and sellers mainly selling local/domestic fresh food.

<sup>59</sup> Some interviewed journalists confirmed that they wrote fictions (which are based on some facts or are combined facts from different real stories) for the publications. “The more moving the story is the better”, said one journalist. Another said: “As long as your story is attractive and makes people react and talk with each other – then it’s success!”

Tien Phong is redefining target audience as younger and having higher income. Redefining target audience in fact means redefining the content. All the four magazines' contents and tones are being changed according to their respective target groups. So are the designs and layouts.

The design/layout and photos/pictures/illustrations are considered the easiest or least sensitive in Vietnamese context to change due to both political<sup>60</sup> and newsroom practical reasons, as its results are visible, and it does not involve or affect a lot of people's work tradition or mindset. Therefore, like many other print media in Vietnam, Tien Phong's changes also started with this aspect. Since the new editor-in-chief came, all the publications started the changes in layout and pictures. The daily started to go colours on the front page and sometimes the last and other pages. Since 1 January 2009 it has a new and "modern"<sup>61</sup> format/look especially on the front page, and has shorter articles, more and bigger pictures, graphics, fact boxes in all pages.

However, according to the editor-in-chief and newsroom's head, Tien Phong's problem is that its current poor economy means it cannot afford good photos and or attract good photojournalists. Also, Tien Phong does not have a good and systematic archive of photos/pictures<sup>62</sup>.

Tien Phong daily remains political-social serious newspapers with strong and influential investigative articles that expose power abuses and wrongdoings in the society. The newspapers aim to serve a democratic and humane society. However, the new strategy (like many serious newspapers around the world) is to make the content more reader-friendly, meaning the political, social and economic issues will be covered and discussed from a "less dry" approach (compared to before) - more human-interest and everyday-life and through the eyes and perspectives of ordinary citizens. Language and tone of the newspapers, therefore, have to be easier to understand, "younger" and more attractive. According to the newsroom's secretaries and some reporters, this is also a way to avoid problems with "the above" meaning the possibly affected political forces.

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<sup>60</sup> see more in chapter II

<sup>61</sup> words used by the newsroom secretaries

<sup>62</sup> A common practice in Vietnamese newsrooms is to use archived photos for illustrative purposes. There could be many explanations to this: money, habit, bad communication between reporters, editors and photojournalists, etc., the latter will be discussed further in the next chapters.

Like other news publications, Tuoi Tre daily and its other publications's strategies include developing news audience-oriented topics and changing more to everyday life language while still maintaining its seriousness political-social paper reputation. In terms of design, it is also the case that it realises that changing design/layout is less risky politically, so discussions of layout changing happen quite often (interviewees 32, 34, 49). In 2007 the daily started to have 20 content pages instead of 16 and changed its design totally.

### *2.2.2. Horizontal integration: Multi – Platform Strategies<sup>63</sup>*

Running online versions is a trend across the world (Doyle 2002; Tuchman 2002). Convergent newsrooms are becoming the norms (WAN 2007; 2008).

The first real online newspaper start to publish in late 2001, officially beginning 2002 is VNExpress (see more in chapter II, section 2.1.2.) even if before that there had been simpler content webpages. VNExpress, initiated and run by a telecommunication corporation, quickly became popular which made other internet companies and all other media realise the need to go online. However, due to the lack of technological and financial resources as well as the traditional print journalism mind-sets, online versions of the print newspapers (even if called an independent online newspaper with self-produced materials other than just an online copy of the print newspaper) was and still is ways behind the ones owned and run by technological and, more recently, some financial companies<sup>64</sup>.

The last 4-5 years saw that almost every print newspaper/organisation has online versions. Every journalist and media boss I interviewed believed that online newspapers are the future as they expect the world's trend will happen in Vietnam sooner or later despite the fact that print is still their cash cows while online versions after a few years of loss have just slowly been catching up with bringing money.

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<sup>63</sup> This section mainly discusses established media organisations (or existing “print newspapers”). The private-disguised companies who run magazines are not discussed even if they also produce television materials (of much larger scales) to sell to or as partners of television stations.

<sup>64</sup> Currently, some financial companies – which have a lot of money to buy technology and technological support, also invest in the media. Investments include establishing online publications focusing on finance and economic issues to first target their own customers and with the hope to earn extra money with the media activities; or pouring money to media partnership projects with established media as discussed above in section 2.8

Instead of having only texts and still pictures like a few years ago and like smaller newspapers nowadays, online newspapers or versions of more popular print newspapers are now all produce web-video and web-radio. Still, because of resource and staff's skills issues (interviewees 1, 14, 22, 32, 37), the web-videos and web-radio are still very simple, mostly just simple pictures and narration of the anchor-people and probably some very short items of low quality.

Like the other progressive newspapers, Tuoi Tre has started developing its multiplatform/convergent reporting with cross-platform promotion, for example when there is a hot exclusive material, it is saved for the print daily and a teaser is provided online.

Of the popular/big media organisations with print as core products, only Tuoi Tre is producing real television programs/materials not only to publish on their online platform but also to sell to (mostly provincial) television stations. More recently, only two-three years ago, some progressive existing print publications, e.g. Phu Nu Viet Nam (Vietnam Women), then a bit later Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, etc. started to have their content on mobile phones (with small charges, for instance Phu Nu Viet Nam charges about 30 pence per month, and also sent to emails (free of charge). All these confirm the trend toward horizontal integration observed in the western media.

Some other aggressive newspapers also build partnership with television stations to produce subject-specific content for the television stations, e.g. An Ninh Thu Do (The Capital Security), which belongs to Hanoi police, produces a 30 minute program on crimes and security situation in Hanoi in cooperation with Hanoi Radio and Television and they share profits from advertising as well as opportunities to cross-promote each other. These partnership fit Dailey et al (Dailey, Demo et al. 2003)' Convergence Continuum's cross-promotion and coopetition models.

Of the popular/big media organisations with print as core products, only Tuoi Tre is producing real television programs/materials not only to publish on their online platform but also to sell to (mostly provincial) television stations to make use of their existing journalistic expertise. The organisation has its own small television team starting with the journalists that like to try new things, who produce video

clips and short features to publish on its online and multimedia platforms as well as to sell to local and regional television stations.

More recently, only two-three years ago, some progressive existing print publications, e.g. Phu Nu Viet Nam (Vietnam Women), then a bit later Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, etc. started to have their content on mobile phones (with small charges, for instance Phu Nu Viet Nam charges about 30 pence per month, and also sent to emails (free of charge). All these confirm the trend toward horizontal integration observed in the western media.

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Unlike Tuoi Tre and other big news media organisations, according to the editor-in-chief and one of the deputies, Tien Phong has not seen in the near future the possibility of becoming a big integrated multi-media house and, thus, has not started to consider concrete roadmap for that destination. However, by gradually re-enforcing and improving its resources (especially financial) with a focus on improving the online newspaper, Tien Phong believes they are already starting to prepare for the multi-media future.

### *2.2.3 Diagonal and vertical integration: expanding into other businesses*

*Diagonal integration* is when firms are involved into new business areas, usually to gain profits, for instance, as both kinds of services are distributed jointly across the same infrastructure (Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Doyle 2002). Vertical integration, which generally results in reduced transaction costs, is also an attractive strategy for media firms (Doyle 2002).

In Vietnam, diagonal integration is a popular strategy to survive and make profits, usually from existing infrastructure and/or relationship/power. Existing news

media, especially bigger and more established like Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong, Lao Dong, etc. usually have been distributed land and/or properties for many years since property cost almost nothing<sup>65</sup>. Now as the land and properties are very expensive and in shortage, the media organisations usually build/renovate the properties to rent out and the profits then can be used to support journalistic work (interviewees 14, 32, 57). Newers organisations do not have this advantage and, thus, usually have to rent much smaller offices (interviewees 9, 100, 105).

Many newspapers, e.g. Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong, Lao Dong, etc. also, making use of their existing staff or developing separate departments, expand to other services (usually somehow related) such as publishing, media and PR consultancy, education or employment consultancy, etc.

Tien Phong established a Tien Phong Joint Stock Company and now has a deciding share (51 per cent) in the company. The company owns a big building with offices to let and a series of book stores and has horizontally and diagonally integrated into a range of services such as education, training, overseas study consultancy, office lease, design and publishing, and event, PR and communication services. Tien Phong's editor-in-chief is also the Chairman of the Managerial Board. Until 2008 Tien Phong's publications sales and advertising were done by the Tien Phong Joint Stock Company and, thus, were detached from the content aspect. Many of Tien Phong's journalists, during my interviews with them and in the papers' staff survey, said that they wanted to know how the company worked as well as complained about its performance in selling copies and advertising, which of course affects their salary and royalties.

Right since late 2008 advertising and sales/distribution are returned to the newspaper instead of being run by Tien Phong Joint Stock Company which now has become more or less independent from the newspaper despite the fact that the editor-in-chief is still the Chairman of its Managerial Board which means that it is

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<sup>65</sup> In Vietnam land officially belongs to the state and private people or organisations only own “the right to use land or property”. However, except for short or fixed-term contracts or illegal cases, owning “the right to use” almost means owning the land or property as they will not be taken back unless there is construction plan, for example road work, in which case the owner gets compensation.

In the past, when the price land was very low, state-own organisations were given land and/or property for their business and employees' accommodation. Now this practice is much more limited as there is a shortage of land.

unlikely the newspaper will criticise the company's wrongdoings if any. Some journalists bring up the issue of conflict of interest (interviewees 15, 28).

According to Tuoi Tre's leaders, the newspaper has its own share companies (distribution, publishing, property businesses) which are run quite separately from the content part as its strategy is to make money but at the same time maintain high quality political-social news status. Tuoi Tre also has properties (mainly office buildings) for lease which bring a lot of money.

One of Tuoi Tre's former deputy-editor-in-chief, who was removed from his post allegedly for political reasons, says that the newspaper had also already been preparing itself to become a business corporation with the core business being multimedia before the Vietnamese government in 2008 officially announced its possible permission for the media organisations; so far only serving as political mouthpieces of governmental, party and public organisations; to establish "media corporations" (interviewee 35).

Through vertical integration it established a distributing company that does not distribute its own publications but also works as distribution agents for other media. According to its head of personnel department, Tuoi Tre's own distribution company is much more efficient than using the national post services.

It also built its own print house not to print its own publications but also offer printing services for other media. In this regard, Tuoi Tre confirms the western literature about media integration, both horizontal, vertical and diagonal as strategies to gain economies of scale and scope.

Lao Dong, one of big serious newspapers, also has its own printing and designing houses and offers services to many different organisations and private people.

#### *2.2.4. Increased Interactivity with the audience*

The increasingly active role for consumers results in the fact that media content changes from mass to niche and to interactive (Kueng 2008). Newspapers have to build trusted relationship with their readers (Doyle 2002; Tuchman 2002; Aris and Bughin 2005).

For a long time Vietnamese subsidised newspapers, being used to having all the financial and resources needs provided by the government, had little need to interact with the audience (interviewees 1, 3, 32, 64). The pattern started to change more than a decade ago with newspapers establishing telephone hotlines for readers to contact them if they had complaints or suggestions or saw something newsworthy, then later they could email the newsrooms, etc. This approach is becoming more and more evident the last few years as the print media going online as they now have more facilities to do so, and obviously also because the competition is getting harder, meaning they have to be much more active in involving audience.

Most print newspapers/publications nowadays also have fixed section(s) and even page(s) for readers' letters, comments, opinions and discussions. Almost every paper has a whole readers' department which takes care of audience's feedbacks and information/materials. The most popular and progressive newspapers more and more use readers' feedbacks as sources of ideas for their journalistic purposes. Quite a few newspapers such as Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, An Ninh Thu Do, etc and especially online newspapers VNExpress, Vietnamnet, Dan Tri, etc. invite readers to send them not only comments, but also their own materials for possible publishing namely video and audio clips, pictures, texts, etc. which are paid royalty if published. The chosen materials are published in separate sections rather than editorial ones and, according to the newspapers themselves, they receive a lot of positive feedback from the audience, and in case of online newspapers, this can be easily check through the click count system (interviewees 15, 16, 32, 37, 57, 64).

Online newspapers/versions have technological advantages in terms of interaction; therefore almost every online page, article or section allows the audience to interact with the newsroom and with each other through forums, voting programmes, and feedback areas.

A new wave of audience interaction and attraction is at the horizon as the online newspapers, which are owned and/or backed up by telecommunication/technology or computer and online game companies, are planning and working on providing online dating and online games integrated with content and/or as separate part of the existing online newspapers (Interviewee 64/ 28.1.2010, Interview 57/



30.1.2010). Another interactive programme that allows readers to “leave their trace in history” is also underway. However, the progressive online newspapers which are introducing these programmes still want to keep quiet about the details due to competition reasons (Interviewee 64). In the reaction to such plan, the more progressive print newspapers (for instance, Tuoi Tre, An Ninh Thu Do, Bong da, Tien Phong, etc.) which also have online content, confirm that they are also in discussion with their technological partners to prepare for similar things even though they understand that the chance of catching up with those “big techno guys” is little (Interviewees 14, 32, 57, 100). According to them, winning the technological game with the big guys is impossible, but at least they should be ready to compete with each other, the print-based newspapers, and so that their existing audience will not have the feelings that they are left behind.

Tuoi Tre’s bosses and journalists claim that everyone in the organisation understands that they have to write for the audience, and that they cannot just write according to their wishes and “force the audience” to read what they like to write. Therefore, they constantly monitor their four channels to research audience’s opinion:

- The advertising and distribution department periodically asks the newsagents who unofficially survey the audience, or actually mostly only observe their customers’ buying patterns and talk to some of them at times<sup>66</sup>.
- The readers’ department and their contributors receive audience comments and analyse them<sup>67</sup>.
- TTO collects statistics about published articles: number of clicks, number of comments, etc.
- The journalists themselves: they listen to their colleagues from other media outlets, their family and neighbours, their sources, etc.

However, they, like probably the rest of the industry with very few exceptions being some commercial television channels/programmes that need official rating figures to attract big, usually foreign or international, companies for

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<sup>66</sup> This is a cheap method of audience research but it poses a high risk of low reliability and validity as it is casually done.

<sup>67</sup> This is also risky and biased as usually only some, usually only extremely happy or angry, readers would contact a newspaper’s readers department about a certain article or newspaper issue.

advertisements, do not do scientific audience research. This is because so far in Vietnam scientific research has never been a tradition, and it is costly (interviewees 21, 32, 34).

Tien Phong is considering upgrading its website and adding utilities such as online games, more forums, etc. to attract viewers and, thus, advertisers. And then the profits from improved advertising will be re-invested in improving the newspaper's content. The strategy also includes "to encourage print and online journalists to cooperate better and educate the journalists about online/electronic media" (including online media culture and economic benefits) (interviewees 14, 16).

The daily and online papers, while still wishing to reach as many readers as possible, have also redefined their target audience who are now much younger than the current readers who the newspaper believes to be late middle-age and older (over 50). Together with this, the newspaper has to change their writing style and topics (interviewee 14).

It is noted that the editor-in-chief as well as the then newsroom chief editor confirm that they have done no official reader demographic research, but only every now and then have casual talks to their regular contributors and some readers and find out that most of them are of older ages and have low incomes, such as pensioners, veterans, etc.

#### *2.2.5. Marketing, distribution and copy sales strategies*

In attempt to keep readers and advertisers, newspapers strategies include offering free commuter newspapers and/or free subscription trials, improving home and newsstand distribution (Kueng 2008).

Vertical integration, which generally results in reduced transaction costs, is also an attractive strategy for media firms. (Doyle 2002)

Unlike in some western countries such as Sweden where a lot of people subscribe to print newspapers, street distribution is a major form of distribution of "market" newspapers in Vietnam. Almost all the copies of the totally "market publications", i.e. entertainment and lifestyle magazines, are sold on street news stalls/vendors,

probably because it is not considered justifiable for offices and businesses to use common budgets to subscribe for them (interviewees 14, 55, 99, 100, 110).

The majority of print copies of more popular serious publications (often big dailies such as *Tuoi Tre*, *Phap Luat TP HCM*, *Thanh Nien*, etc.) are also sold in big cities and towns through street news stalls/vendors which retail the copies because most Vietnamese households and individual readers do not have subscribing habit (interviewees 15, 32, 55, 108, 113).

The second biggest channel of distribution of the popular and serious newspapers/dailies, also the biggest and sometimes the only channel of distribution for the smaller and/or party and/or subsidised publications, is through the service of National News Media Distribution Company, which is owned by Vietnam Post Corporation under Vietnam Post and Telecommunications Corporation (VNPT). The service is done through the Corporation's local post offices which also own news stalls for some publications retail<sup>68</sup>. Most of the copies going through this channel are distributed to subscribers who are state and public institutions, offices and businesses. Many of the latter two, especially the bigger ones, used to subscribe for some party-owned newspapers, usually *Nhan Dan* (the biggest/central party newspaper) and their local party newspaper (for instance, big offices and businesses in Hanoi bought *Ha Noi Moi* (*New Hanoi*) which is the Hanoi's party daily). However, the trend is that more and more private businesses and non-state/party offices stop subscribing for the party newspapers and only keep subscribing for the most popular dailies for news purposes, as mentioned in chapter I.

Traditionally, the distribution in big cities is as follows:

- Popular and widely sold (or market) newspapers/ news publications:
  - + each newspaper has a small department called "distribution department" or "distribution and advertising department" which consists of only a few people who pick up copies from print houses early in the morning, drop subscribers'

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<sup>68</sup> Also, private people can and are encouraged to operate small-scaled post offices in their localities on franchised basis, usually with limited services such as paid telephone boots and sales of stamps, post cards, stationaries and newspapers/magazines. Other news stall owners can simply buy publication copies and sell on their own or together with other kinds of commodities.

copies at the main office of the NNMDC in the city/town and bring the rest to the newspaper office where they meet the street news stalls agents.

+ street news stalls/agents pick up a number of copies at the newspaper's office. The number of copies they take usually more or less the same every day, based on their average sales of the newspaper/publication. Before, many newspapers and magazines used to allow agents to return unsold copies in the evening but very few (usually the smaller ones who want to attract agents) do now as the agents usually took much more than they could sell which make the newspapers suffer from loss, especially these days when the paper and printing costs are much more expensive.

+ Subscribers receive their copies around 8am delivered by the NNMDC.

+ News stalls start selling papers to local people and/or work commuters around 6.30-7am (normal working day for businesses is around 8. Schools and state-owned organisations usually start earlier 7.00 or 7.30. It is noted that most institutions, except for small businesses, subscribe for copies of the most popular newspapers and the ones of their sectors, but, as mentioned earlier, most copies are sold retail through news stalls).

- Party newspapers and those that are less sold or cannot be sold on streets<sup>69</sup>: mainly through NNMDC service that delivers the copies to subscribers - offices, as mentioned above.

Big and middle newspapers usually have their representative offices in big cities/towns which do not only contribute to the content but also are responsible for advertising and sales/distributions in the areas.

Distribution in smaller town is done through the local services of NNMDC which is widely criticised by the public for its bad quality. The newspapers copies usually come to readers much later during the day. In some remote/mountainous areas they might or might not come, or come days or even weeks late (interviewees 14, 32).

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<sup>69</sup> Street stalls usually only sell the "sellable" publications, most of which are entertainment and lifestyle magazines, "robbing, killing, raping" dailies/publications and the most popular serious dailies such as Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien. Many middle serious newspapers such as Tien Phong is also sold on street of the main cities but the number of copies sold through this channel is small.

A number of factors have an impact on the print papers' sales or distribution strategies. Some are beyond newspapers control. For example, according to a journalist and a media researcher, the news publications sales are also affected by contingency factors such as weather. At mid years' time, for instance, Southern Vietnam is in rainy season<sup>70</sup> and whenever it rains in the morning, that day sees an immediate decrease in newspapers sales (interviewee 55).

Secondly, newspaper sales are affected by the business practices of the street sellers. According to many street news stalls' owners/sellers, the number of each newspaper's copies they buy/order everyday depends on the number of sold copies the day or days before. For instance, if today they bought 10 copies and only sold 5, tomorrow they will only buy 5-7 or so to reduce risk. But this means tomorrow if a reader gets up a bit late he might not be able to buy the copy. Many interviewed journalists and editorial managers complain that often they cannot buy copies of their newspaper at street stalls even though there might be a lot of unsold copies left at their office (interviewees 16, 18, 22, 25, 26, 42, 49).

However the street sellers are only reacting to an important factor - readers' unexpected behaviours or casual reading habits, which can heavily affect the sales of newspapers, especially dailies. From the perspective of the audience<sup>71</sup>, the unwillingness to subscribe is due to the following reasons:

- digitalisation: most of the reading-for-information readers work in offices, businesses, etc. meaning they can read the news there or on the internet;
- most of the street news stalls' readers are local housewives, street market sellers, taxi or *xe om*<sup>72</sup> drivers, etc. who tend to read the "robbing, killing, raping" news publications and magazines. Another segment is local

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<sup>70</sup> Southern Vietnam has a year-round warm climate with two main seasons: dry and rainy while northern Vietnam has four distinct seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter.

<sup>71</sup> I often did casual surveys with news stalls' owners, sellers and buyers by asking them about their selling and buying habits and the reasons behind them. I also observed and talked with other newspapers' readers who work in offices, businesses, etc.

<sup>72</sup> *xe om* (literarily means "embracing vehicle") is one of the most, if not the most, popularly used means of paid transport for Vietnamese people in cities and towns. It is a motorbike with a driver, just like taxi, but it is cheaper and usually quicker and much more flexible as the traffic in big cities are very bad and there are many small lanes that are inaccessible by cars or buses.

pensioners who might be interested in reading serious news<sup>73</sup>. These kinds of readers claim that they usually only buy a publication if they hear from someone else that something interesting/hot/important happens in the news, for both economic and mentality reasons. The news stall sellers I interviewed say that they also have casual buyers (commuters who are passing by the stalls) who are not local, but not so many.

The southern newspapers, those with headquarters in the south, or actually in Ho Chi Minh City, appear more able to adjust their distribution/sales strategies to audience habits, than the northern ones. This appears to involve developing a close relationship with news agents which did not exist just about a decade ago.

All the popular big dailies such as Tuoi Tre, Phap Luat TP HCM, Thanh Nien, Nguoi Lao Dong provide the content outline of the next day issue for their main distributors/agents or the agents take initiative to contact the newsrooms to ask for the main articles' content outline so that they can decide the number of copies they want to buy. The newsrooms, in their turn, inform their print houses about the total number of copies to be printed.

As such, when there is something “hot” about a specific locality/town/region, the circulation for at least that day in that locality can increase sharply. For example, according to a media researcher and a manager of a local journalist union (interviewee 55), the series about some gangs that have connection with the local police in Dong Nai, an industrial province only 50 km from Ho Chi Minh City, helped Phap Luat TP HCM increase its circulation by 3000 copies in the province and 5000 copies in Ho Chi Minh City. Another example is Nguoi Lao Dong, which increased its circulation and distribution by 1500 copies that day in Binh Duong and ever since is more welcome and sold there and in the surrounding area thanks to its intensive coverage of the mysterious death of an engineer inside the local police's temporary cell who was claimed by the police to have left a suicide letter in the cell while his widow claim that the hand-writing was not her husband's and that just after her husband's death a policeman asked her for sex.

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<sup>73</sup> This cohort is believed by Tien Phong's bosses and staff to be the main group of readers of the daily.

Unlike the southern newspapers, most of the northern ones, which usually have smaller circulations than the ones mentioned above, do not keep such everyday close contact with distributors/agents. Some journalists explain that the subsidised or ticket-time culture<sup>74</sup> is still more evident in the north, meaning services are poor, while the south has become much more market-oriented (interviewees 16, 19, 21, 28, 53).

Another trend is that the big, popularly sold newspapers (namely Tuoi Tre, Phap luat TP HCM, Thanh Nien, Cong An TP HCM, Sai Gon Tiep Thi, Nguoi Lao Dong, Phu Nu TP HCM) which are those that sell more on street, now have their all distribution/sales done by more or less independent distribution companies usually called “agents” even though they might also have a small distribution staff who usually are the contact points that deal with the distribution companies. The “agents” are often private companies that have a wide network in different locals, similar to the national post service mentioned above but “run much more efficiently” according to some newspapers’ editors. These companies can distribute publications for different newspapers/organisations.

Different newspapers have different distributing partners/agents. For instance, Thanh Nien has all its distribution in the southern region done by a big agent, but delegates its distribution in the north and middle regions to many small agents. Tuoi Tre, one of my two case studies, has its own distribution company which distributes not only its sales in southern Vietnam but also many other newspapers/publications. However, as the company does not have staff in Da Nang, the third biggest city in Vietnam which is in the middle of the country, Tuoi Tre’s own publications’ distribution in the city is done by small local private agents.

The majority of smaller newspapers, namely Tien Phong, Dat Viet, The thao-Van hoa, Sai Gon Giai Phong, Lao Dong, etc. work both directly with street stall sellers and use services of agents/distribution companies.

Some newspapers with weaker brand names have to distribute their copies to stalls on a “returnable” basis, meaning the number of copies unsold can be returned to the newsrooms by the sellers.

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<sup>74</sup> During the subsidised time of communist planned economy (1976- 1986) tickets were used to buy commodities and cash was limited. Little or no competition existed.

*Tuoi Tre's* distribution strategies include:

- Continuously expanding the distribution network with different selling methods;
- Shortening the printing and delivering time in all areas
- Developing long-term subscription;
- Improving marketing and audience relations by keeping close contact with the audience through emails, telephone hotlines, etc.
- Investing in both key areas and low-competitive areas<sup>75</sup>

Despite its vertical integration strategy, therefore, the company uses a range of distribution methods. As this company cannot reach every corner of Vietnam, *Tuoi Tre* also uses the post office and other small private agents. Within the newsroom, *Tuoi Tre* also has some distribution staffs in the headquarters and in representative offices who act as contact points. Information on how to subscribe or buy different publications are provided both on the publications themselves and online where readers can submit their subscription. Subscribers can pay by bank transfer, at one of *Tuoi Tre's* offices or at home (or another address)<sup>76</sup>.

Thanks to the strategies, *Tuoi Tre* has gained the most “number one” in Vietnamese news media industry:

- involves the most distributors/agents (more than 500 big agents)
- highest number of stalls: *Tuoi Tre* is sold by more than 6000 retailers
- earliest copy release
- logo present in most retail stalls

Most importantly, the result of this distribution strategy is that, of all the new media in Vietnam, *Tuoi Tre* daily has the highest number of long-term subscription (about a fourth of its circulation).

Unlike the other popular newspapers described above, *Tien Phong* daily has a bit lower rate of stall retail selling than subscription. Rather than street sellers, or the

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<sup>75</sup> which is different from other newspapers. However, this is probably because *Tuoi Tre* has more resources than its smaller competitors.

<sup>76</sup> It is noted that online direct shopping/payment does not yet exist.



national distributor, its main distribution channel is through the post office service which delivers the copies to subscribed offices/institutions. Besides, the stall retailers/agents everyday pick up their ordered copies from either the newsroom, print houses or also post offices. This way of distribution, according to both the newspapers' managers and interviewed staff, is too "state-owned commercial" - a term used for bureaucratic and bad quality services originated from the "old" state-subsidised times (interviewees 14, 15, 16, 22, 28, 29)).

Tien Phong's editorial board, the business manager and the R&D department have been working to find new strategies to improve the distribution. According to the R&D interviewees, these might include developing a local delivery system similar to the one in the West where local school kids or pensioners are paid a relatively small amount to deliver copies to individual subscribers -a system that has not been seen in Vietnam so far. They hope this customer-friendly approach, which might also be cheaper and more timing than the national post service, will help boosting individual subscription. However, not much new has been decided on this issue.

#### *2.2.6. Advertising sales strategies*

In Vietnam neither the advertising companies nor the companies/organisations that advertise do any serious evaluation of the ad's effectiveness (interviewees 3, 7, 10, 32, 64).

The most common sales strategy still is offering discounts on regular or long-time ads (interviewees 10, 14, 55, 32, 64). Some papers like Tuoi Tre offer discounts if the customers advertise on more than one platform, i.e. both in the daily and online.

To my observations and some unofficial interviews with about 20 advertising staffs from media houses and ten advertisers, most advertisers in Vietnam choose popular media (big names, high circulations) or "peak time" on television or radio instead of really select the right media and the right time for their target customers.

This, together with the fact that media outlets do not have any research-based demographic statistics about their audience as well as do not have money to offer

high commission, makes it very difficult for smaller newspapers to obtain ads. And in the time of economic crises like the last few years, this factor also make sensible advertisers and/or their customers to choose alternative advertising or even skip it totally.

The trend is that advertisers are becoming more and more selective and demanding. This means advertising is moving from smaller newspapers to bigger ones. Small and middle newspapers have fewer and fewer ads while the most popular newspapers attract most of the ads. Tuoi Tre, for instance, had an average of 40 pages of ads in late 2009 beginning 2010 but as of now the number can be up to 80 pages per issue while the content has only 20 pages.

Another strategy to sell ads, usually employed by small newspapers or less popular magazines or journals, is to give high commissions to advertisers or middle-people who might use their personal relations to obtain ads/money from different companies, or who might share the commissions with the advertising staff in some companies who then are more willing to advertise on those specific publications.

No official data exist about Vietnamese print news media circulations and readership which is usually different from the circulations because of Vietnamese readers' behaviours (see more in Appendix 1). It is not mandatory for print houses to publish the real circulations, and they never do. Very few key people in a newsroom know for sure what their circulation (which can change every day depending on the content of the day) is. According to a newsroom chief editor of one of the most sold papers, only the editor-in-chief (the highest boss) knows exactly how many copies are printed everyday while the rest of staff can only guess<sup>77</sup>. There is sort of an “unwritten law” in the media industry that those who

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<sup>77</sup> This is different from when I started working as a reporter for An Ninh Thu Do newspaper, the most sold in the capital Hanoi and rated 18 nationally according to table 7, in 2008 when during every morning meeting all the staffs were told how many copies were printed and sold, which gave us some perspective about what kind of articles sold better. However, it is noted that the newspaper was at the time published only twice, then three times weekly and, thus, had a relatively small staff that allowed meeting every morning with all reporters and editors.

Nowadays, almost all the reporters I interviewed say that they are not informed of, nor do they care about, the exact numbers, only general information whether the circulation is up or down considerably. High and some middle level managers are usually more aware of the sales situation but they are reluctant to talk about it unless they have a close personal contact with the researcher. Generally speaking in most dailies and even periodicals, only editors/heads of departments or their

know keep their mouth shut (including print houses who know the exact numbers and who might have to inform the police or government when something happens, but the latter also have no benefit in revealing the correct numbers)<sup>78</sup>.

Therefore, a common strategy among print publications is to announce fake circulation figures to attract advertisements (interviewees 1, 12, 29, 32, 53, 55).

Only Tuoi Tre confirms that the circulation figures it publishes is the real ones (interviewee 32). Advertising accounts for two thirds of *Tuoi Tre*'s annual income. As mentioned earlier, as of May 2011, the daily has about 80 pages of commercials per issue which is a dream for every other publication in Vietnam. Like most other serious and progressive newspapers in Vietnam, Tuoi Tre's strategies toward advertising include improving audience-oriented content, cross-platform discount promotion, professional staff and prompt services including consultation and ad design, etc.

Tien Phong is trying to improve the current poor situation of having on average one or two pages a day of advertising (compared to Tuoi Tre which has about ten and in the peak time even more than 40 pages). Unlike many other dailies of its size or bigger, Tien Phong daily's cover sales does not cover the production costs. However, so far no special strategy has been implemented, even though the business bloc staff seem to have started to work in a more systematic way, starting with building and publishing a brochure/profile with clear information such as advertising policy, price list, target audience description, circulation and distribution areas; and distributing it to their potential customers such as big companies and advertisers. Similar information is also made easier to access on Tien Phong online newspaper compared to before.

As mentioned earlier, the newspaper is also redefining their readers. The new target group is now 24-44 year-old, urban - those who earn more than five million VND per month<sup>79</sup>. Tien Phong's leaders argue that "as these are modernised

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representatives attend morning meetings. Big meetings with all staffs including reporters are usually monthly or, in some cases, even quarterly.

<sup>78</sup> It is possible to find out about the real circulations, but the information has to be off-record and, thus, cannot be used even for research purposes.

<sup>79</sup> This could be considered upper average income in big cities where the income gap is huge. The regulated minimum wage, which is altered quite regularly due to high inflation (9 times over the last decade - , in state-owned and public organisations is 830.000 VND/month (about 25 GBP)

newspapers, their readers will be those who can take modernisation". In other words, as the editor-in-chief explains, these are the people who can afford the products that are advertised on the newspaper. Such, the redefinition of target audience, together with content changes, is to aim to attract advertisers.

This, in my view, is an interesting point, as it might show a trend toward more professional advertising activities, as traditionally both newspapers, advertisers and/or advertised companies/organisations do not really care about advertising effectiveness and most advertising deals on the news media are done either by buyers thinking that it is better to advertise on big-circulation media (whose audience in fact are not necessarily their potential customers) or by advertisers offered high commission rates from the media.

However, unlike Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong does not offer cross-media or cross-platform promotions as regard to both content and advertising.

#### *2.2.7. Other strategies*

Other popular strategies to increase circulation and improve the economy of the newspapers include having strategic partnerships promotion campaigns such as organising and/or sponsoring events, cooperating with other kinds of companies to give away different products such as CDs, DVDs, books, and even soap, shampoo, etc. to the papers' audience. This strategy is observed in the West too (see WAN 2007; Kueng 2008).

Another strategy common among newspapers is organising social activities. While Tien Phong, which also does its social responsibility activities every now and then, focuses on cultural and sports events such as Miss Vietnam, football tournaments, etc. Tuoi Tre focuses more on charity and fund raising work. With its popularity and social influence, Tuoi Tre can easily mobilise resources from different businesses, public organisations and individuals. Its funding department receives donations from audience and different organisations every day and the funds are used to build schools, bridges and other public infrastructure in

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(see Vietnam Government Web Portal at [http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page?\\_pageid=598,1&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page?_pageid=598,1&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL) for more details).

disadvantaged areas (see Le 2008c and many other media coverages about Tuoi Tre's social activities).

These kinds of activities do not only bring social reputation and appreciation from the beneficiaries but also generate publicity about the organising newspapers and its partners/sponsors (interviewees 14, 32, 49). However, these have also brought up the question of conflict of interest (interviewees 10, 17).

### *Summary*

In order to cope with the changing environment being cost cuts, increased competition and production costs, the news media's strategies include the trend toward multimedia or multi-platform production, audience-oriented topics and language, improving interaction with the audience, keeping a serious political-social general daily as the core product while trying to reach more fragmented groups of audience, horizontal, vertical and diagonal integration, etc. These strategies confirm the international trends noted in the literature review. Beside that, the ownership and political control have forced the media to develop interesting organisational and professional strategies specific for Vietnam.

The question is: while everyone is doing more or less the same thing, why some are more successful and the others are less? What could be the differences? There is a popular saying "change needs to be from inside". Do different newspapers have different internal strategies taking into account the fact that they have totally different economic and organisational situations?

What are the newspapers' newsroom strategies and what are the factors that influence the implementation of the strategies? In other words, what are the newspapers' internal problems and how those affect their newsrooms' efficiency? The next chapters try to answer those questions.

## **CHAPTER V: TIEN PHONG AND TUOI TRE'S NEWSROOM EFFICIENCY STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION**

Chapter IV has examined the news media's strategies at industrial and organisational levels. This chapter and next will go deeper to the next level – individual newsroom operation.

As mentioned in chapter II, at the operational level, the issue of **efficiency** is the journalists' biggest concern (Schlesinger 1987, who said the journalists expected his research would be about how to improve efficiency).

Efficiency “serves the organisational need of getting work done on time” (Tuchman 1978:78). “Any slips in the smoothness of a production would be talking points” (Schlesinger 1987:270). Journalists are concerned about an absence of a centralized newsdesk and that the organisational departmental separation leads to duplication of coverage and waste of resources as many reporters go to same news events. The complaints are also about the poor personnel arrangement or, in other words, manpower dispositions, for instance big and strong teams are allocated for off-peak programmes and vice versa. There are also other concerns of professional and medium-related type, namely about the time-slots, air time of stories, the use of voice-overs, etc. (Schlesinger 1987) which might be translated from radio-television to print as positions of articles, length of stories, the use of visual/reading aids namely titles and subtitles, pictures, boxes, quotes, graphics, etc.

This confirms my original observation that there seems to be a lot of inefficiency in the way Vietnamese news organisations and journalists operate. Journalists from both Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre are also concerned about inefficiency at work. To them, efficiency means smooth work, time and resource saving while still maintaining good quality (interviewees 17, 19, 22, 32, 47), paper published on time (interviewees 15, 16, 26, 27, 32, 39), articles getting published (interviewees 17, 25, 29, 41, 51) and everyone happy and feeling good at work and earning enough to live and develop career (interviewees 20, 37, 44, 45, 50).

Media management literature suggests that media performance and productivity are influenced by different factors: organizational culture, organizational

structure, individual cognition and learning, management and leadership, team composition/work style. (McQuail 1992; Cuilenburg 2000; Golding 2000; Lacy 2000; Picard 2000; Kueng 2007a; Kueng 2007b; Kueng 2008, etc.)

Organisational behavior suggests that organizational culture, leadership, management styles, motivation, work climate are important (Newstrom and Davis 1993; Schein 2004; Yukl 2006; Robbins and Judge 2008). Burke (2002) adds task requirements and individual skills/abilities as factors affecting organizational performance and change.

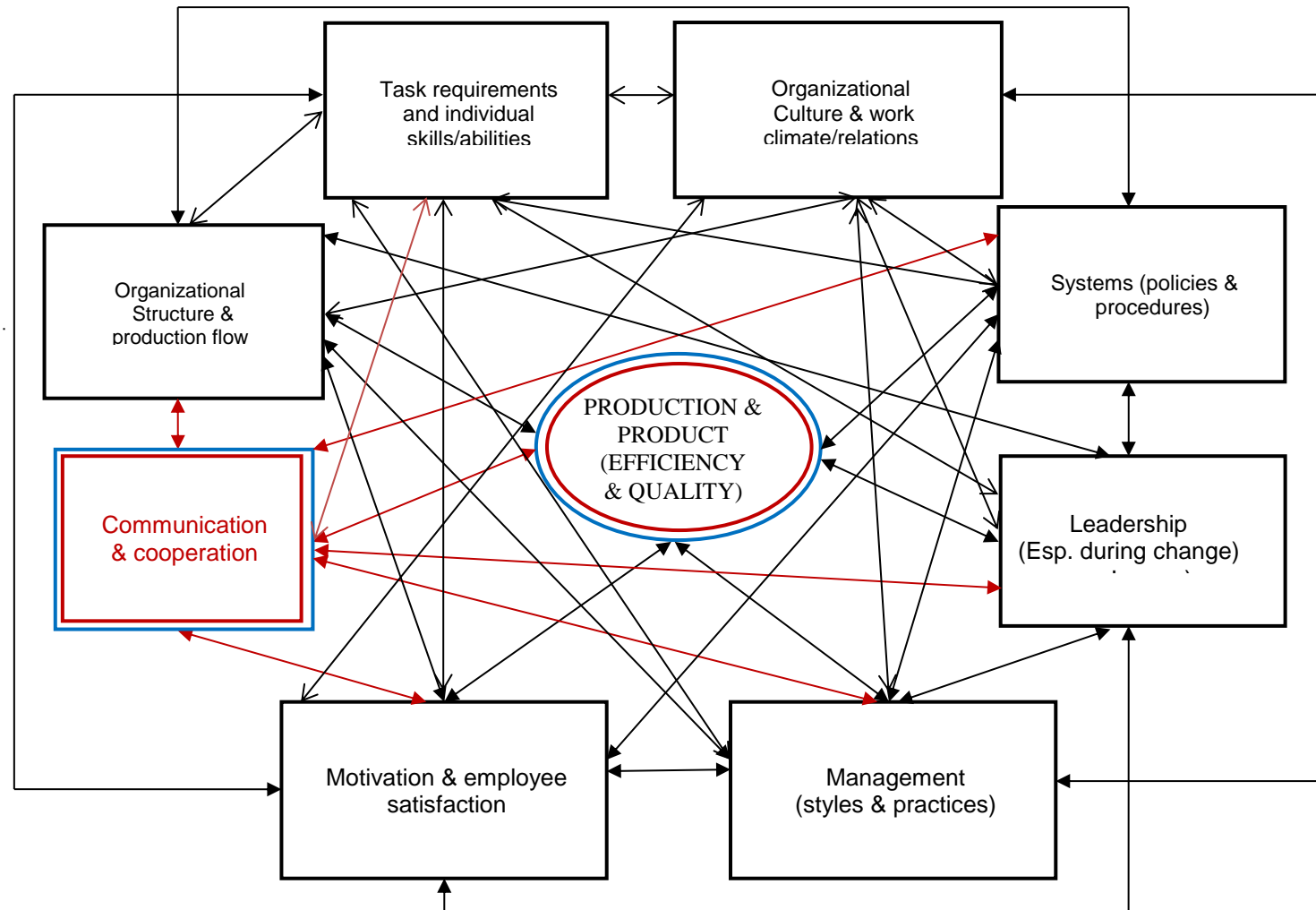
“Effective managing major change requires attention to change communication, organizational satisfaction and culture and upward communication” (Gray 2004). Poor internal communication has been identified as one of the single most destructive elements in an environment undergoing change (Bryan 1994; Holtham 1994; Kotter 1995; Nelson and Coxhead 1997). There is a strong link between internal communication and business performance (Gilbert and Sanchez 2005). Better communication creates better employee satisfaction which in turns leads to reduced staff turnover, customer satisfaction and, thus, higher profitability. (Hopton and Bain-and-Co. 1994; cited in Quirke 2008) Communication provides information, acts to control member behavior and fosters motivation (Robbins and Judge 2008).

Combining the theories, I suggest having the following model as framework to analyse the internal factors that affect newsroom efficiency and newsroom strategy/change implementation (Figure 2). The model will help answering the following research questions:

- What are the problems that hinder the newsroom efficiency at Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre?
- What are their strategies to correct the problems?
- What are the barriers to changes in the newsrooms?
- What is the role of “communication” in newsroom management?

## NEWSROOM EFFECTIVENESS

FIGURE 2: INTERNAL FACTORS AFFECTING NEWSROOM EFFICIENCY





## **1. CASE 1: TIEN PHONG**

### **1.1. Introduction to Tien Phong**

Tien Phong Newspaper was established in 1953. It is officially owned by the Central Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union but financially independent. Like other political-social serious newspapers and unlike entertainment, lifestyle or politically less sensitive ones, Tien Phong is under direct and close political pressure from its owning organisation even though the Central Youth Union bosses do not usually interfere with its everyday newswork.

Tien Phong's headquarter is in the capital Hanoi. It has six representative offices in Vietnam's big cities: Ho Chi Minh City, Can Tho (south), Da Nang, Thua Thien Hue, Tay Nguyen and Nghe An (middle) and correspondents in about 20 out of the total 65 Vietnamese cities and provinces. The headquarter operation covers the whole northern Vietnam which seems reasonable as the semi-diameter from Hanoi is only around 300 kilometres. However, the 10 per cent copies sales in the middle of Vietnam does not seem to justify the number of representative offices in the area even considering the fact that the middle region spreads long. The copies sold in the north account for 55 per cent and the south 35 per cent of the total sales. Tien Phong's editor-in-chief says that as it is now the middle region representative offices "seem to incur financial loss" (though no one has ever officially made an audit on this!) but they need to be present for information-gathering purposes (interviewee 14).

Tien Phong has one print daily, four print magazines, one advertising supplement, and one online newspaper. The core publication is Tien Phong daily, which has 16 pages per issue<sup>80</sup>. The daily is printed in Hanoi and four other cities by other printing companies as Tien Phong does not have a printing house. The announced circulation of the daily was 70000 copies when I was doing my fieldwork there late 2009 to mid-2010, but as of early 2011 according to the newspaper's media kit, the number is 150000!<sup>81</sup> Most of Tien Phong daily copies are sold to

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<sup>80</sup> some issues even have one or two full pages out of the 16 for advertisements.

<sup>81</sup> As mentioned earlier, announcing higher circulation is a common practice to attract advertisers.

it is noted that, in an attempt to do branding, in 2011 Tien Phong issued a brochure/media kit. The interesting thing is that the brochure shows that Tien Phong offer journalism, public relations and advertising services all of which are under the leadership and management of Tien Phong editorial

subscribers who are institutions or big organisations but a significant number is also sold through the street stall system. The paper is currently searching for ways to improve their stall selling system as they believe that channel is probably the most important to sell in Vietnamese context (interviewee 14).

The target audiences of Tien Phong daily (and the other publications) are not clearly defined. My interviews, and the newspaper's staffs survey, show that many journalists are wondering who they are writing for. However, most interviewees believe that most their readers are relatively "old", as the newspaper traditionally focuses on heavy political and social issues. Interestingly, while most interviewees, and the staff survey respondents, think the newspaper should try to be younger even though it should still keep being serious, some respondents believe that the Youth page, which covers the young generation activities and issues, is too silly and bad taste (interviewees 22, 27, 28).

Tien Phong's ex-editor-in-chief, Mr Duong Xuan Nam was an poet and a journalist with the paper for a long time from 1975 to 2008 and was its editor-in-chief from 1997 to 2008. During his time as the editor-in-chief he also worked as the head of "news media bloc" owned by the Central Ho Chi Minh Youth Union and head of a Central Communist Party's organisation. He has recently been criticised for focusing too much on other activities, including writing literary works and organising popular beauty contests<sup>82</sup>, than the newspaper's content operation, which led to a sharp decrease in the paper's circulation (according to the staff survey). He has also been criticised by some of his staffs for being unfair toward Tien Phong's journalists, which caused a lot of internal conflicts (interviewees 17, 21, 24, 28), while some other interviewees still claim that he contributed a lot to the newspaper's development (interviewees 19, 26).

Tien Phong has a total staff of nearly 200, of whom about 110 are journalists including correspondents in about 20 Vietnamese cities and provinces.

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board. The question is whether or not Tien Phong can build an image of a great unbiased news content provider in such a circumstance. How can Tien Phong criticize a company or agency that has huge PR and/or advertising contracts with it.

<sup>82</sup> Tien Phong started to organise Miss Tien Phong beauty contest, which was also the first beauty contest in Vietnam after the American war, in 1988. Since 2002 the contest has become Miss Vietnam contest and the main organiser remains Tien Phong. The contest happens every two years.

During my fieldwork, I was told by the R&D manager that there had been no official job description or regulatory documents, which was why the department was assigned to establish proposals for them.

The current editor-in-chief, Mr Doan Cong Huynh, was appointed from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2008 by Tien Phong's owning organization and approved by the Press Bureau, Ministry of Information and Communication. He had been considered a successful editor in chief of Sinh vien Viet Nam (for University and college students) and Hoa Hoc tro (for school students, teenagers). Before becoming the editor-in-chief of the students' newspapers, he had been the newspapers' editor/columnist, very popular among Vietnamese students in the role of a "big brother" who answered their teenage questions.

His appointment has created both hopes and scepticisms among Tien Phong's staffs as some journalists question his capacity as the leader of a serious political-social newspaper which, in their view, is totally different from leading students' light-hearted publications (interviewees 16, 18, 29, 30).

After this man came to Tien Phong, he brought some people who worked with him in the other papers including Tien Phong's current R&D manager and one of the deputy editors-in-chief who is in charge of Tien Phong's magazines.

It is difficult to trace back the strategies the newspaper used during the leadership of the previous editor-in-chief as there have been a lot of changes within the newspaper including personnels and content. I believe it is a natural break in the newspaper's development with the arrival of new editor-in-chief, especially considering the most current changes in the news media industry the last few years. Therefore I decided that the newsroom strategies I am studying for this thesis would be the current ones starting with the newspaper's current new leadership.

## **1.2. Newsroom efficiency management**

### **1.2.1. Problems affecting newsroom efficiency**

According to the editor-in-chief and newsroom chief editor, Tien Phong is favoured by the head (called Secretary) of the Central Ho Chi Minh Youth Union

which is a political advantage for the newspaper. The Union gives the new editor-in-chief and the whole newspaper the following assignments:

- The first year (2009): re-enforcing personnel and the organisational structure to improve work relations and efficiency
- 2010: Increasing the circulation.
- 2011: Establishing "Tien Phong culture"
- 2013: Becoming the vanguard newspaper<sup>83</sup>.

Immediately after coming, the new editor-in-chief conducted a staff survey to understand the newspaper's internal situation including the staffs' perception and feelings toward the working environment, structure and performance of the newsroom, readers' department and the content departments, their relationship with the editorial board (including the editor-in-chief and deputies) and the newsroom, as well as performance of both high and middle management<sup>84</sup>. The staffs were also asked about their evaluation of Tien Phong's different products/publications.

Here are the problems communicated by the journalists:

### ***Low motivation and low job satisfaction***

The survey clearly shows how frustrated the staffs are and how much they want revolutionary changes to the newspaper. Of the 39 completed questionnaires I read 35 believe the working relationship in Tien Phong, the number and quality of articles they produce, working conditions and equipment are of low or very low

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<sup>83</sup> It is not clear to Tien Phong's staffs what "Tien Phong culture" and "vanguard newspaper" mean.

<sup>84</sup> Unlike in many Western newsrooms, Vietnamese news organisational structure is more hierarchical, with different terms that are not translatable. In newsrooms there are usually:

- "editorial board" that comprises of editor-in-chief and his/her deputies who are the top bosses. However, Tuoi Tre has a bit different structure - see section 4.;

- "newsroom" or "newsroom secretariat" which comprises of newsroom chief editor and his/her deputies (often called "chief newsroom secretary" and deputy chief newsroom secretaries", editors (often called "newsroom secretary" as well as copy editors (often called "editors" - to differentiate with the term "editors" in Western context which might mean "editors-in-chief"). The term "newsroom" here means the editorial room or department where the editorial work occurs - different from the term "newsrooms" used in the title of this thesis which is broader and comprises of the whole content-related personnels, activities and whole place where content production occurs;

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quality. The same evaluation is about the final products - the daily's content is not good enough, some publications such as the monthly and weekly papers should either be improved significantly or killed. The respondents show their discontent with the salary and royalty system which they believe is much lower compared to ones of other newspapers, inefficient personnel, high hierarchy, low motivation, unfair treatment to staff, etc. This is even more evident in case of the more “famous” and competent journalists who say they do not feel appreciated enough, considering the payments, and, thus, have to write for other newspapers – competitors under one or some different names, which is forbidden in any newsroom. This has a negative implication for Tien Phong as it loses the “exclusiveness” of important and, thus, best-selling stories (interviewees 17, 19, 29).

Some journalists claim that about half or even more than half of the staffs could be made redundant without any negative impacts on the production (interviewees 17, 19, 28).

This confirms Schlesinger (1987) that beside pay and conditions, journalists’ criticism includes only about the way editors work, specific work style requirements, as well as the matters of efficiency (p268-269).

My observations and interviews with the journalists also confirm Tien Phong’s employees’ very low job satisfaction.

In fact, the survey answers, interviews and observation of morning meetings all see many complaints about almost everything: low quality and uninteresting content, missing important news, low incomes, bad time keeping, so many people earns their (actually our) shares without doing anything, no punishment to those who do not perform/do not do what they are supposed to do, people lack of disciplines, editors edit wrongly, giving high royalties to low quality articles, or “why are you so negative all the time?”, “why are you always so aggressive to everyone else?”, “why didn’t you inform us?” , “why didn’t you ask me before cutting out that most important detail?”, etc.

Some interviewees told me that they no longer care about other people or the future of Tien Phong. Some others seem to only see the negative things going on,

and usually it is someone else' fault. Most people clearly show, and speak out, that they are bored, and sad, and frustrated.

So, the question is why the situation is like that? The following sections try to find the reasons why people are so unhappy with their workplace. It is found that there are many factors: work power structures, production flow and communication practices, personnel policies, etc. that play important roles.

### ***Aggressive organisational culture and work climate/relations***

“Like the air in a room, it (culture) surrounds and affects everything that happens in an organisation. Because it is a dynamic systems concept, culture is also affected by almost everything that occurs within an organisation”(Newstrom and Davis 1993:58).

Before the new editor in chief came to office, during a long period under the leadership of the previous editor in chief, the internal conflicts were even worse, according to some survey respondents who gave quite details accounts of the situation to inform the new chief with the hope that he will change it.

The main reason, according to them, was the wrong and unfair personnel policy that the previous chief was running. For long during Tien Phong's golden time, the editorial board, which consisted of three people, was working very well together, bringing Tien Phong to big achievements at the beginning of the economic reform in Vietnam. However, then one of them died in 2000 and for years the editor in chief at the time did not promote anyone else, despite the fact that Tien Phong had some senior and competent journalists that could very well suit the position. This, according to the survey respondents who are confirmed by some of my interviewees (15, 17, 26, 28), made the suitable ones upset even if they did not say it out loud. In the meantime, many others, who were not as competent and reputed, saw the opportunities and, thus, started to fight with each other as, in one respondent's words “ghế thì ít đít thì nhiều” (this means: too few seats for too many asses) (Interviewee 28).

Also according to this respondent and some other journalists that I interviewed, closer to the time the previous editor in chief was about to retire, more and more internal conflicts happened for the same reasons. Most personnel appointments

and promoted, which also meant higher incentives, during this period of time, especially in the newsroom secretariat, were very personal and unfair. Many got promoted not thanks to their abilities/qualities.

Probably the new editor in chief's decision to "change Tien Phong's blood" when he newly came to office was the result of the survey when he learnt about this situation. We will discuss his decision and its results/consequences in more details later.

### ***Poor communication and cooperation***

Communication, or the lack of it, involves in aspects of an organization and every step of the production flow. Therefore, it is possible to approach communication from different aspects.

One newsroom deputy chief editor says: "Tien Phong has many good, even excellent, journalists/individuals but they envy and distrust each other, and enjoy down-grading each other. They are not united!" (interviewee 17).

Many other interviewees confirm this, saying that Tien Phong's journalists are very independent. Reporters do not usually work in teams and have conflicts with each other (interviewees 15, 16, 17, 22, 24, etc.).

As we see from the news flow discussed above, a lot of people involve in editing and proofreading an article. Many reporters complain about the fact that newsroom editors do not communicate with them when they change something in the article. The consequence is that many articles get distorted, or sometimes "edited from something slightly wrong into something completely wrong" (Interviewee 17), leading to frustrated reporters and bad future cooperation. Another complaint is that they write many articles but they do not get published which is a waste of time and resources. They work hard but do not get paid accordingly (interviewees 17, 18, 21, 22, 28, 29)<sup>85</sup>.

From the other side, newsroom editors complain about the fact that despite the "rule" that reporters and departments have to inform the newsroom by 9 o'clock what they are doing that day but very few do that and, if someone does, they rarely communicate in details. This leads to the fact that editors have nothing to

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<sup>85</sup> Beside the basic salary, the reporters get royalty for every article they get published.

do during the day and heavy workload in the afternoon or late at night. Some days they have a lot of articles to choose from, but most of the time there is a shortage and the articles are of bad quality (interviewees 15, 16, 27).

**So, the relationship between the newsroom and the reporters/departments** is very tense. There is little interaction and discussion between the departments and newsroom editors, according to the survey respondents and interviewees.

My observations confirm this. During the morning meetings, which are the only frequent time key people (one of the highest bosses, newsroom leader and editors on duty, heads of departments) meet and discuss work, the followings are the norm:

- People do not care, listen to or discuss with each other carefully about the story ideas. Instead, they do their own jobs: making phone calls, joking with others, reading newspapers for story ideas which they should have done before coming to the meeting.
- People do not share their ideas. They do not discuss story ideas and angles with each other, but later on blame each other for not doing it. When the heads of departments announce<sup>86</sup> their story ideas the newsroom editors rarely ask or discuss what angles the reporters are taking, how they go about it, how long the articles are, etc. At the end of the meeting, the newsroom leader on duty usually only state things such as: “Inputs are poor today”, “Today we seem to have good stories”, “I think this or that story is ok as the main for the front page”, etc. without consulting the other participants. The others do not protest or discuss anything either. But, then, later the editors complain that they have no ideas how the articles are like, what kinds of pictures available, what angles of the stories and, thus, cannot start thinking where the articles should be, whether they should be grouped with related stories, etc. They do not even know whether they will get the articles in the afternoon at all.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> They do announce, not propose, their story ideas as usually they will do the stories anyway, no matter what the newsroom editors think about the stories.

<sup>87</sup> Sometimes, editors contact the concerned reporters directly during the day to ask and discuss instead of going through the heads of departments. The reporters usually cooperate as they also want their articles to be published. However, according to one interviewee, not all the newsroom editors have the habits of keeping close contact with reporters. Also, usually the editors keep better contact with more senior and “tougher” reporters as they do not want conflicts with those



- The heads of departments sometimes give more details about the stories, but do not usually react at what newsroom editors say. They just do the stories without discussing much in advance. But then later, they, together with reporters or on behalf of the reporters, would complain that the newsroom editors destroy their articles.
- A few newsroom editors and heads of departments are not hesitant to show their hatreds to each other. Often, it seems they have to protest each other not for the common good, just for the sake of getting it out on each other. They sometimes even bring up mistakes in the past to down-grade the other.
- Instead of discussing and sharing to work for the common good, some people focus on small details especially slips of the tongue to downgrade each other. “They intentionally misunderstand each other”, said a senior during one of such meetings.
- Instead of coaching, people often give advices to each other in a quite arrogant way, which leads to annoyance, resistance and even negative reactions from the listeners, especially as the listeners do not think the other people have enough expertise in the subjects.
- “We have nothing today”, “We do not have much”, “nothing deserves to be the main story”, “Today’s inputs are poor” are the most common conclusions by the chairman (one of the newsroom leaders) and/or editorial board member on duty at the end of each morning meeting (that I attended).
- When there is a problem, or a conflict, it is brought out but never dealt with properly.

**The relationship between the online newspaper and the print daily** is also interesting. As mentioned earlier, officially, the two papers share the same newsroom. The online section is called online department which is equal to other content departments and the technical department. The head of online department attends the everyday morning meeting and discusses the day's content plan like

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reporters, especially those that can write commentaries or editorials as newsroom editors need their helps every now and then.

any other heads of departments, meaning basically informing everyone the main things he has for the online papers. There is little discussion about what should be for online and what should be for the print paper as most other departments want to publish their materials in the print paper because the royalty for print is better than for online.

The consequence of the online department being considered equal (in power) with other content departments such as international, politic, social, economic, youth, etc. is that the head of the online paper cannot mobilise the other departments' staffs to produce for the online papers. Also, the other departments' reporters do not want to write for the online as the royalties for online is less than for the print. Reporters only send their articles to the online paper if their materials are not exclusive and other online media might have already published the news before the print goes on the press, or if they are told to do so by the highest bosses, meaning the editorial board. Therefore, the online department of ten, despite the fact that they cover content of all news subjects, usually have to fill their outputs by themselves instead of having journalists from other departments to write for them.

Thus, despite officially being under the main newsroom's hierarchy, the online department in fact runs as a more or less independent newsroom (with four own newsroom secretaries/editors who are in charge of different content subjects and who are under the leadership of the head of online department - unlike in the daily newsroom where the newsroom secretaries are above the heads of departments in the hierarchy). In other words, the head of department decides everything for online paper including all news content publishing, except for the columns copied exactly from the print version, without having had to go through the newsroom and editorial board like in case of the print daily. Only in case of big and sensitive issues the online head would discuss with the newsroom and/or editorial board and in such cases, cooperation with other departments might be needed.

Similarly, print and online cross promotion is not done regularly. Sometimes Tien Phong online (TPO) does promote the print paper but only with a link "read Tien Phong number...." to another page with the ad-like summary of the next day's issue content. No promotion for the online paper has been found on the print paper.

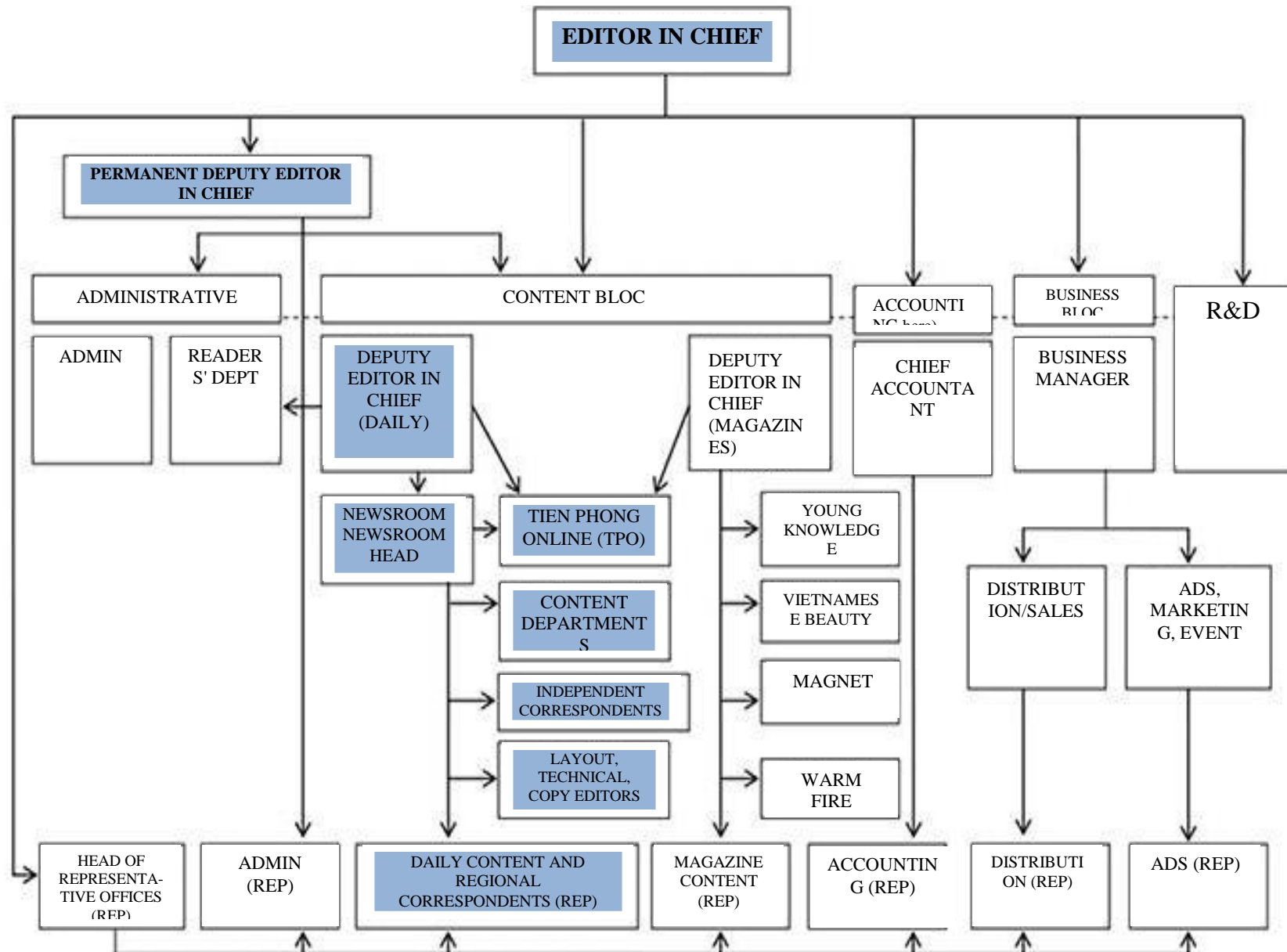
To summarise, despite being quite a big name in Vietnamese news media industry for years, the last decade sees Tien Phong's backward steps with drops in circulation, bad economy and, most seriously, poor cooperation and a lot of internal conflicts that generated from the past under the leadership of the previous editor in chief.

How the new editor in chief and his alliance have been trying to change the situation, and whether or not their attempts are successful will be answered in the following section.

### ***Conflicting organisational structure and production flow***

Even though, according to the R&D department, it was impossible to draw an organisational structure/workflow chart of the newspaper, finally the organisation managed to draw one as follows:

**FIGURE 9: TIEN PHONG ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE**  
(including 3 blocs and equivalent functional departments)



### *The editorial board*

The editorial board consists of 4 people who have the highest decision making power in the organisation. The board's members' power is discussed in more details below.

### *Newsroom (newsroom secretariat)*

At the end of 2008 the newsroom (secretariat) had 10 people: the newsroom chief editor, one deputy, six member editors who were in charge of different content/pages, one chief's assistant, and one administrator. From September 2009 two deputies, two member content editors and two photo editors are added. Also, under the suggestion of the newsroom chief editor and approval of the editor in chief, the 21-staff technical support department (including copy editors/readers, layout (technical) people, photo technicians), 4-staff "artists" (design and graphics) department, and one "alerter"<sup>88</sup> all are now merged to the newsroom and under supervision of the newsroom leaders/managers, making a total of 42 staffs for the newsroom. This is a totally new structure in an effort to make the news production flow smoother. It will be discussed more later in this chapter.

### *Departments*

There are eight content departments, each with a head and/or one or more deputies, reporters and copy editors. They are: News/Current Affairs, Economic, Culture and Entertainment, Youth issues, Science-Education, International Affairs, Security and Legal issues, and Features/Reportage.

Beside the eight departments, the representative offices, like in Tuoi Tre case, are considered equivalent to content departments in terms of administration. The representative offices and regional correspondents work directly with the newsroom and editorial board, not with the content departments even though at times the content departments may contact specific correspondents to discuss cooperation when they want to have "local factors" for their articles. This means possible overlapping and/or news missing and/or conflicts as newsroom

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<sup>88</sup> This is a retired experienced journalist who now works as a paid editor to check the final content for mistakes, especially politically sensitive ones, that all the other people including the editorial board member might have missed. This person only works at late night before the pages are sent to the printing house. Actually he has discovered quite a few bad mistakes/errors which are usually only found by readers with "fresher" mind who have not worked much with the copies during the whole process.

secretaries and the content departments do not necessarily work hand in hand. This will be discussed more in section 2.

Tien Phong Online (TPO) has ten people including the head editor and four other editors called “online newsroom secretaries” and five reporters. Administratively, TPO is considered another content department. According to the newspaper’s (or in fact, as perceived by its bosses’) news production flow, though, TPO is under supervision of the daily newsroom’s chief editor and, of course, the daily content deputy editor in chief. However, in reality, it works more or less totally independently as a separate newsroom<sup>89</sup>. The implication of this will be discussed further in the next section.

The layout and arts (technical) department consists of mostly young and male people while the arts’ people are middle-aged. In this regard, the situation is similar to the relationship between the newsroom, which consists of mostly younger editors, and the departments’ heads that are generally older and more experienced. This in itself already implies possible conflicts in mind-sets, skills and capacity<sup>90</sup>.

The technical department had been independent from the newsroom secretariat until a year before my fieldwork when the new newsroom chief editor proposed to and got approved by the editorial board that this department should be under the supervision of the newsroom, i.e. the newsroom people especially the leaders can give directions to the department’s staffs, to make the news production process smoother and quicker.

So what is the problem with this structure?

### ***Conflicts of power: Leadership and management practices -Who are the bosses?***

Let us look at the organisational structure regarding the daily print and online newspapers, i.e. the blue part within chart 1 above. From the blue sub-chart, it is not clear what kind of relationship between the newsroom and the online newspaper (TPO) and the content departments is.

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<sup>89</sup> This will be discussed more in section 3.

<sup>90</sup> Read chapter II for more details about Vietnamese culture and traditions.

According to the direction of the arrows, it seems, for instance, TPO is directed by/accountable to Deputy editor in chief (daily) AND Deputy editor in chief (magazines) AND newsroom secretariat head at the same time. This does not reflect the reality. Or, the content departments should be accountable to the newsroom secretariat, which does not reflect the official administrative structure. Or, it is not clear if the newsroom and TPO are equal in level. All these show the confusion and inconsistency even among the news organisation's bosses and staff. We will discuss these below. Now let us start with the highest level in the power structure:

### *The top leadership*

The editorial board, which has the highest decision making power, comprises of the editor-in-chief and his three deputies – the permanent, the daily content, and the supplements’.

The editor-in-chief started his job in Tien Phong only a year before this research after his successful career in some other less political newspapers. He also brought to Tien Phong from his previous papers one deputy editor in chief and the head of R&D department.

The deputy editor in chief that the chief brought from his previous workplace is in charge of all the other publications than the daily and the online papers. She and her much smaller newsrooms work only under the general directions given by the editor in chief and totally independently/separately from the rest of the organisations. There is hardly any interaction and the daily and online journalists hardly know anything about the publications production and situation. For the purpose of this research, I did not study this part of the organisation but only focused on the daily and online newspapers as they have much more interaction with each other (the blue sections in the organisational structure chart above).

Beside the above-mentioned deputy, Tien Phong has a permanent deputy editor in chief who officially is delegated to do the editor-in-chief jobs when the latter is out of office<sup>91</sup>. Thus, this man is in charge of both organisational logistic and

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<sup>91</sup> In many if not almost all Vietnamese organisations, especially state-owned, even though the highest boss has highest responsibility, deputies are given/delegated certain jobs/duties

administrative issues and news production where he reads and approves the content before it goes to the press.

There is also a daily content deputy editor in chief who was promoted soon after the editor-in-chief came to his office from being the head of the news and current affair department.

Unlike Tuoi Tre, whose editor-in-chief and deputies have little news media background and, thus, do not directly involve with detailed journalistic production<sup>92</sup>, both Tien Phong's editor in chief and the two deputies are journalists themselves and, thus, directly involve with journalistic work. They take turn working as the leader/final approver of each day newspaper issue, meaning staying in the newsroom/office until midnight when the content is sent to the printing house. This rotation of on-the-day editorial duties is, according to Schlesinger (1987), a common management method in newsrooms where long shifts are common even for senior managers.

The editor-in-chief usually works like an editor and a big maestro that directs the whole show in big political or economic news events/issues, even not on his duty day.

Some interviewees told me off-record that there is some scepticism among the journalists about his capacity as the leader of a tough political-economic newspaper like Tien Phong (Interviewees 15,17, 29) . "The boss is new. Therefore many people still are sceptical. The boss has probably not decided who he should trust and who he should not. Most people are still waiting. There are only a few that are devoted to work. The internal conflicts are still alive and kicking." (interviewee 29)

However, my general observation and feeling is that he is quite respected and listened to by the staff. The only question is whether he asserts his authority enough to make everyone work hard for the organisation's overall goals. When he first came to office, he carried out huge "brave" changes to the newspaper's personnel, creating both anger, fears, scepticism and hopes among the staffs. However, later on he seems to change his approach to a much softer one. This will be discussed more later.

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<sup>92</sup> See chapter VII.



The permanent deputy editor is also in charge of logistics and administrative part of the whole organisation and, thus, is too busy to focus enough on content, according to some interviewees. And he is considered “not tough enough to deal with hard political and economic news” by many staffs. He is liked as a nice individual but not really respected as a journalistic leader by the tough journalists.

The daily content deputy, on the other hand, is respected for his journalistic skills and experience. He had been working as the head of the current affair department before he was promoted to his current position by the editor-in-chief just a few months before this research was done. His being newly promoted and his lack of experience in one of the highest positions in the organisation have made him somewhat nervous and reserved in front of his colleagues. Therefore, this deputy does not have very high authority to the other journalists, especially the heads of departments and older people in the newsroom<sup>93</sup>.

Still, as mentioned earlier, as all the three members of the editorial board are journalists themselves, they are active in the production process and, even if the journalists do not consider them “Gods” meaning always obeying them, their opinions/decisions are final.

With such direct involvement of the editorial board, the newsroom chief editor and his deputies have much less decision making power compared to those in Tuoi Tre (see chapter VII).

Despite the “whole blood change” which was considered by staffs as “violent” (interviewee 29), “Revolutional” (interviewees 15, 17, 23, 30), the editor in chief is taking a soft approach on everyday management. He says he believes in uniting people. Therefore, when there is a conflict, or someone makes mistakes, or someone breaks rules, etc. he usually only mentions it saying something like: “We should not do this”, “we should not do that”. No further sanctions are in effect, which sometimes make other people than the ones that made the mistakes frustrated and discourage them from doing their best. For instance, once during my fieldwork, there was a big news event about a kidnap case, which is quite rare in Vietnam, which happened in a town in the middle of Vietnam. The headquarter’s editors including even the editor in chief himself tried hopelessly to

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<sup>93</sup> In Vietnam, age is an important factor in people’s relationships and interactions, which makes it difficult for younger superiors at work. See chapter II for more details.

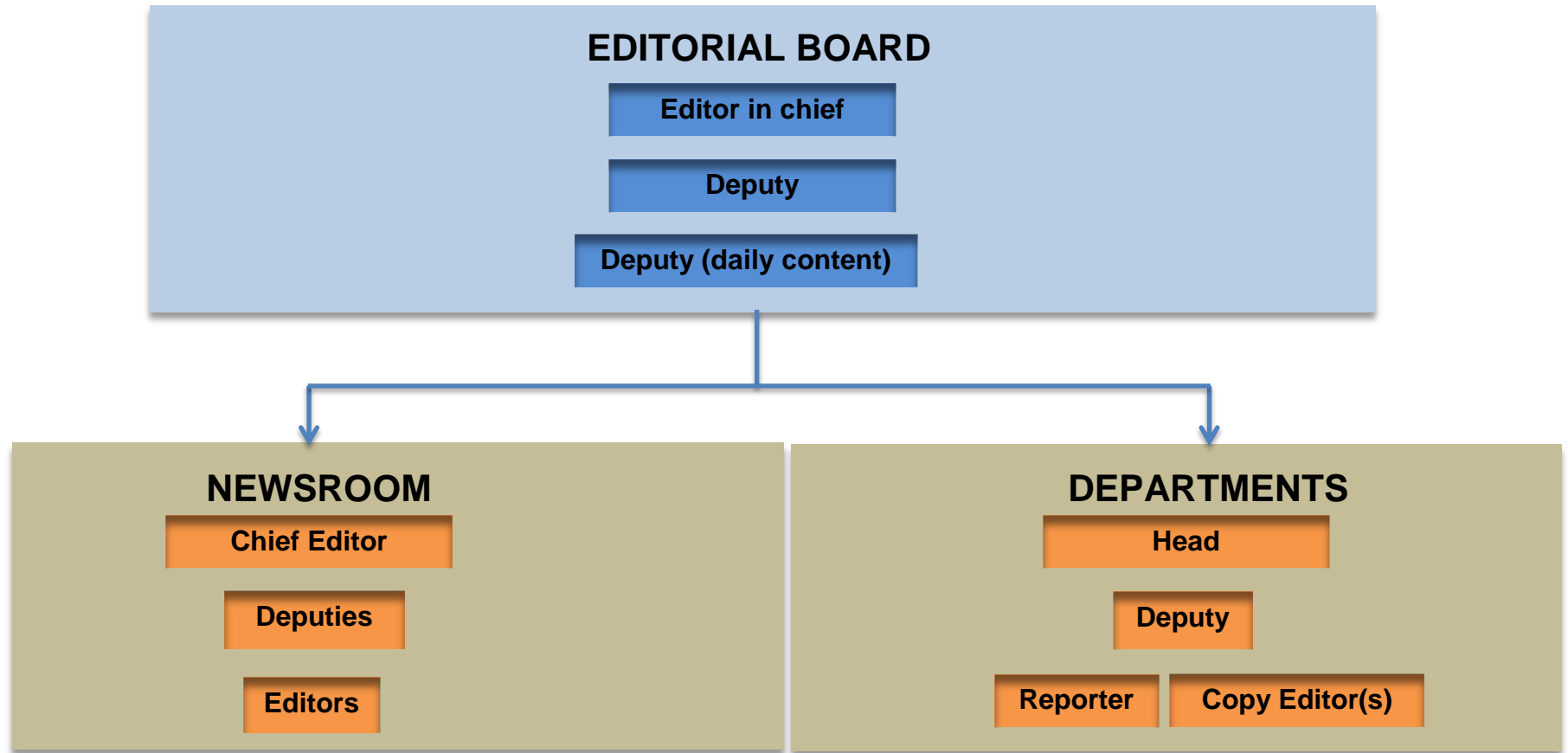
reach the correspondents in the area but one turned off his phone and the other did not answer. It was late, so the headquarter could not send someone from Hanoi. Therefore, Tien Phong missed the news while almost every other newspaper covered it in interesting ways and the news was so popular almost everyone on the streets talked about the kidnap. In the next morning meeting, everyone showed their anger and demanded to punish the correspondents but the editor in chief only said: “we really have to be disciplined. This is unacceptable. We have to punish this kind of behaviours”. It was not clear who “we” were. The case was dropped later. No one was punished.

Now let us look at the next levels of the hierarchy - the main participants of the production: the newsroom (secretariat) and the journalists with their departments.

***Conflicting structures: Administrative flow versus decision-making flow. Poor management practices***

Administratively (according to the rules governing state-owned organisations that also apply to media houses), the newsroom and content departments are of the same level, meaning the newsroom is not superior to the content departments. The administrative structure is as follows:

**FIGURE 10: TIEN PHONG ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE (daily content)**



According to this structure, and to the in-house regulation, reporters are accountable to their heads/deputy heads of departments and the heads/deputies answer to the editorial board. The same in the newsrooms: newsroom editors are accountable to the newsroom chief/deputy chief editors who, in turn, answer to the editorial board. This means newsroom people officially cannot give directions/orders to reporters and their department bosses.

However, in reality, as the newsrooms have the power to decide which news items are not published and which are, and how, i.e. on what page, how long, what pictures, graphics, etc., while the departments have less control at the later stage of the production and, thus, the departments become “lower” in the decision making ranking. Figure 11 below reflects this.

**FIGURE 11: TIEN PHONG NEWS PRODUCTION DECISION MAKING FLOW (daily print)**



However, newsroom editors can have problems working with reporters and the heads/deputy heads of departments as these people do not take their orders/instructions and, thus, often challenge them. In fact, there have been quite a lot of conflicts between these two forces. However, the newsroom editors decide the later stage of the production, when the reporters and their heads of departments are not present to protest! Therefore, the reporters and departments' bosses also have to compromise. But the tension is always there and creates frustration for both parties<sup>94</sup>. To make the matter worse, people take it personally and, thus, hate each other which make it impossible to cooperate in many cases. More details about the relationship between the newsroom and journalists and their departments will be discussed in section 3.

To put it another way, the content departments do have “soldiers”/journalists to write articles but they do not have the power to publish the articles. The newsroom people, on the other hand, have the power to decide what to publish and/or how to publish them but do not have journalists to produce them. They cannot force the journalists to do things the way they want. The relationship between the newsroom and the journalists/departments is quite interesting. They are dependent on each other but, at the same time, really conflicting. The journalists want their articles to be published meaning they have to some extent to compromise with the newsroom editors. In the structure, the newsroom editors have more power but they cannot just make up all the stories to fill the pages without the inputs from the journalists/departments. Therefore, it happens very often that the newsroom editors have to “chase” journalists for articles especially closer to the publishing deadline. They also often prefer working directly with reporters instead of going through the heads/deputy heads of departments, which could irritate the departments' bosses. This happens every day causing a lot of frustration and distrust among all the staff.

Tien Phong Online (TPO) is an interesting case too. Administratively (meaning officially to the whole world), it is considered one of the content departments, meaning of the same level as the newsroom and other content departments. Within the organisation's structure and belief, in principle, it should be, like other

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<sup>94</sup> In this regard, the situation is exactly the same as in Tuoi Tre (see chapter VII). However, Tuoi Tre has even more complicated structure as they have more titles/positions in between: ordinary members of the editorial board, and especially subject chief editors who can be anywhere, either in the editorial board, newsroom or departments.

content departments, subordinate/accountable to the newsroom secretariat which, in turn, is subordinate to the editorial board. As such, its content should be subject to the newsroom chief editor and his deputies' approval.

But in fact, it works more or less totally independent as a separate newsroom, even independently from the editorial board. The reasons, according to both daily newsroom's editors and the head of TPO, include:

- The main newsroom editors are less familiar with the online environment, meaning have less experience than the online people, which make them hesitant to interfere and make the online people hesitant to obey. The newsroom editors are also too busy with the daily's work already (with hundreds of news and features items sent to the newsroom everyday) and, thus, drop the online part (which publishes between 100-150 stories per day). These are actually only the surface. The main reason is the hard conflict between the newsroom people especially the chief editor and the head of TPO individually, as well as the conflict between the print and online sectors<sup>95</sup>, which is similar to that in Tuoi Tre and elsewhere;
- The TPO's head has a head-strong leadership style; meaning the newsroom people do not want to encounter and, thus, try to avoid as much as they can<sup>96</sup>;
- Online publishing requires constant and continuous decision making while the editorial board members (highest bosses) are not available all the time.
- Online content is not yet considered as an important business as the print by the big bosses even though, according to them, they are aware of its current and future role. This is because the print newspaper is still the cash cow for the content part of the organisation's business and the online papers are still considered "secondary". Also, this is more or less still the mind-set of the majority of journalists in Vietnam.
- Unlike print, online publishing means it is easy and quickly to remove any items that are deemed "inappropriate", especially politically. Thus, the bosses are generally more relaxed about online content than the print<sup>97</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> This will be discussed more in the next section (section 4)

<sup>96</sup> According to my observation, the TPO's head and the newsroom's chief editor seem to hate each other. The TPO's head never seems to miss a chance to protest/disagree with the newsroom's head.

Therefore, the head of TPO has more or less full control of the online content and online personnel arrangements. He decides almost everything: approves ideas and final products, gives assignments to the online reporters and editors, discuss story developments with the journalists when they are out in the field, and also edits articles together with his other editing staffs.

He still attends the morning meetings with the main newsroom and other departments' heads or representatives, during which he also proposes (or in fact only briefs the others about) TPO's main story/stories of the day as, according to my observation, the other editors do not really discuss the ideas with him, or actually at all<sup>98</sup>.

To summarise, this section presents the differences between the organisational administrative structure and the real work flow or, in other words, the structure-wise work relations across departments/sectors at Tien Phong which affect the smooth production as it creates tension between reporters, their departments and the newsroom editors.

### ***Hierarchical news production flow***

Generally, the news production in Tien Phong is probably like in any other news media houses elsewhere in a sense that it has different stages:

- Idea development,
- Desk and field research including interviewing and picture taking/filming
- script writing
- editing
- publishing.

The ideas can come from the reporters themselves or as assignments from the departments, newsroom or editorial board. The red arrow flow in Figure 11 above reflects the copy flow while the blue one is the instruction flow.

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<sup>97</sup> In fact, the online content could even be more "problematic" as it is easy for social media users to do screen shots or trace the removed content and then circulate it widely. However, in Vietnamese context, once the content is removed from its original source, it is considered more or less "safe" politically for the source and less punishment is likely compared to the mistakes in the print.

<sup>98</sup> See more details about the meetings in section 3.



However, in fact, the copy flow in Tien Phong is even more hierarchical:

Reporter writes the article ➡ Department's copy editor (if any) proof-reads and cuts short if the article is too long ➡ Head or deputy head of department edits, mostly checks and give instructions if anything needs to be added or changed ➡ newsroom's administrative secretary records all the inputs and distributes the articles to ➡ appropriate newsroom editors in charge of the page(s) edits/prood-reads ➡ Newsroom deputy chief editor in charge of the subject field(s) edits/proof-reads ➡ Acting newsroom chief editor edits/proof-reads and then reports the general story ideas to ➡ the editorial board member on duty and then transfers the copy to ➡ technical person/people who import texts, pictures and do dummies ➡ proof-reader 1 ➡ Layout/design ➡ morasse proof-reader 2 ➡ all involved check and sign the final maquette ➡ editorial board member on duty approves maquette ➡ final technical checks/changes, converting to PDF files, printing the final maquette of the whole issue ➡ newsroom chief or deputy chief editor on duty signs order to transfer files to the printing houses<sup>99</sup>.

As we can see from the process, a lot of people are involved in editing and proof-reading an article. One can imagine how different the final version could be from the original, especially if newsroom editors and proof-readers do not communicate with the reporter concerned when they change something, which happen very often at Tien Phong. As we will see, this is the reason why many reporters complain about their articles being totally distorted, or sometimes “edited from something slightly wrong into something completely wrong” (Interviewee 17).

Also, with this kind of copy flow, newsroom editors, especially the leaders, spend most, if not all, of their working time on editing and proof-reading the existing articles and, thus, have very little, if at all, quality time for reflecting and obtaining an overview of the newspaper issue in particular and the situation of the organisation and media industry in general. They do not have time for short-term

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<sup>99</sup> Tien Phong does not have its own printing house and, thus, has to have its copies printed by several commercial printing houses.

and long-term content strategies and plans, and thus, cannot either give directions to reporters or “place orders” to buy the journalists’ or contributors’ products.

The staff survey and some interviews show that many reporters complain about this fact, saying that the newsroom editors “do not have any strategies and plans” (Interview 28), “do not know how to develop story ideas when there are big news events” (Interviewee 17), “go fishing, having no idea what they want to buy from journalists” (Interviewee 22), etc.

Both the copy and instruction flows have problems due to the conflict of power and hierarchical flow, as mentioned above, as well as the way work is divided in each sector, as below:

The three editorial board members work in shifts as so called “organisation leader on duty”. Similarly, newsroom leaders work in shifts as “newsroom leader on duty”. Moreover, everyday one newsroom member editor works as “newsroom main editor on duty” and another works as “newsroom additional editor on duty”<sup>100</sup>. The same is with design/layout people. The on-duty people have to work from early morning until midnight when the final maquette is transferred to the printing houses. They are responsible for the final content and layout.

There are some problems that associate with this arrangement. Some interviewees including reporters and editors complain that:

- It puts pressure on the editors on duty as they have to read and edit content in all subjects many of which they do not have enough expertise/knowledge about. Those who are not on duty usually do not do much even if the articles are of their subject fields<sup>101</sup>;
- News items are usually processed during the day, so there is little problem. However, it could be more complicated with big features. It happens that today’s shift leaders approve a reporter’s idea and the reporter works for a few days, but when he submits the article, it is another group of leaders/editors on duty and they decide not to publish it or want to have it

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<sup>100</sup> The others still go to work as normal but they work 9 to 5 or less hours. They do not have to stay and work with the copies until the final maquette is transferred to the printing houses.

<sup>101</sup> Even though they can be off work, usually page and subject editors in the newsroom and heads of departments still are supposed to edit/proof-read their subject articles (see the copy flow above), but even in that case they leave office in the afternoon, actually exactly when the work is the most intense, considering the fact that Tien Phong’s newsroom editors usually do not have content plans in advance and, thus, have to wait until very late in the evening to see what they have for the issue. As such, the editors on duty are left with content of all the subjects.

developed in a totally different way. This happens sometimes and really upsets the journalists and departments concerned.

- Similarly, design and layout people work on duty and there is little consistence in their ways of design/layout day to day.

Moreover, layout and arts people do not usually start working until 6-7pm. This means there is hardly in-advance discussion about how the products will appear on the newspaper (length, with or without boxes and/or graphics, how pictures should be, etc.) which was felt to affects the work and the work quality of the reporters and editors. It happens quite often that the pictures taken by the reporter or photojournalist are not usable and the newsroom/arts and design department has to use footage or illustrating photo/drawings, or the reporter or someone else has to go back to the field to take different pictures and/or do more interviews, etc. which is a waste of time and resources and not fun for anyone. This could be avoided simply by involving everyone in the production chain right from the beginning.

According to the R&D department and the newsroom chief editor, it is impossible to avoid shifts as no one can work constantly from morning till midnight every day. However a lot of conflicts/problems mentioned above can be minimized by having a common set of news criteria and house styles. That was why they were assigned to develop such frameworks. Whether they work is another issue.

***Poor personnel management: Individual skills/abilities not meeting task requirements***

Beside the staff surveys that the R&D department conducted, as mentioned earlier, at the end of 2008, the newsroom new chief editor conducted an audit to find out the following problems with the old newsroom's operation:

- Newsroom editors (secretaries) only were doing the job of copy editors, meaning editing the articles reporters and contributors sent them. They had not had plans for coming issues. There was little interaction and feedback between the newsroom and heads of content departments as well as reporters.

- No reserved materials or "savings", meaning the editors/secretaries always were in reactive mod and had to wait until the end of the day to know what they would have for the issue.
- No deadline system
- Too little attention was paid to organising current news. There are no fixed sections for news items. There are very few good/interesting news items that could possibly be developed into good features. News items appear on page 2 and page 6 (current news pages) on a very casual way and usually only serve as “space-fillers”.
- Almost always missing the printing deadline, which is due to the lack of planning.
- Heads of departments not checking their reporters' materials before they were sent to the newsroom. No clear copy flow.
- Half-manual design/layout with paper, not computerised, dummies
- Layout men worked totally independently leading to design inconsistency.
- The newsroom not having plans and proposals from departments and representative offices and correspondents before every morning meeting (also it might mean the content departments did not prepare) which made it impossible to have the meetings efficient. No report from the newsroom secretaries on duty on the day's issue.
- The newsroom not directly operating the printing technical department/section
- Representative offices, correspondents and even headquarter reporters not briefed/informed of every-morning meeting's content.

The editor's research findings confirm my observations, interviews and the two survey results. And even more problems have been found by the journalists who seem very bored, unmotivated and even upset and who really want a change.

Now let us have a closer look at Tien Phong's daily working atmosphere and practices to find the reasons behind the journalists' discontent.

Some newsroom editors believe 1) there should be more people in the newsroom and 2) break the departments – eliminate some positions such as heads of departments as the heads should work in the newsroom instead.

Some others, especially more head-strong heads/deputy heads of departments, want departments (i.e. themselves) to take over the newsroom's charge meaning they should be able to decide and control the content of their page(s) without "outsiders'" interference.

These wishes seem conflicting, but in fact they are basically the same: the wish to flatten the hierarchy. The only problem for the highest bosses is who to make redundant, and what to do with them! Conflict of power is always present and the current editor in chief is not head-strong enough to resolve it, so the situation remains the same.

One should bear in mind that in Vietnam it is not easy to sack someone or move them to another position (see Appendix 1).

The tension has made the bosses and the staffs start experimenting a solution: "transferring/handling the pages to the departments". This strategy will be discussed more in the section.

According to many interviewees including the editor in chief and some other senior journalists (interviewees 15, 17, 28), Tien Phong has many reporters with high journalistic skills. However the same cannot be said about the editors.

One of the reasons for the intense conflicts between the content departments with their reporters and the newsroom secretariat is the fact that the newsroom editors' performance is not persuasive to and, thus, not appreciated by the reporters.

Many reporters complain about either their articles not published without explanation, or the editors do bad jobs cutting all the most important information from their articles, or try to correct the correct details into wrong, etc (interviewees 15, 17, 19, 29, 30). The newsroom members are young in age, profession, as well as experience. They were good reporters but bad editors meaning not having newsroom management skills and leading skills. They abuse power. They edit without knowledge of the subjects and without consulting reporters (interviewee 28). "They never have any plans. They only live by waiting for news to happen. They do not know how to develop story ideas for big news events. They often make articles worse." (interview 17)

This view is supported by the majority of the staff survey respondents even though some seem fairer saying that in some important news events the newsroom

editors have done well coordinating different departments/reporters but generally speaking they are under-performing (interviewees 15, 29).

The newsroom editors are not happy with their jobs either. All the editors complain about their workload. There are only a few editors who have to do a lot of work often in a close deadline. They complain about reporters writing too long with redundant words/phrases and they have lots of difficulties cutting the stories short. They also complain about the reporters and/or departments missing deadlines or not willing to cooperate or doing bad jobs, etc.

So, the question is who is right? What are the reasons for this situation? It seems there is more to discuss about the leaders' personnel management strategies. Beside the conflict of power or the question "who is the boss" discussed in section 2, another question "who should do what?" should also be asked. The role, responsibilities and benefits of newsroom editors are very unclear. Are they supposed to be more or less technical supporters for the production, or should they be the leaders, navigators, strategic content directors and coordinators?

Currently, editors (or newsroom secretaries), including the newsroom chief editor and his deputies have to do copy editors', departments' editors' and, especially when it is close to deadline, reporters' jobs. They edit the copies including correcting grammar and spelling mistakes, add more or cut long articles short (much more often) to fit the allowed space instead of having the reporters do it. They even have to write their own articles in case there is not enough material from reporters to fill the paper, which happens very often. Some newsroom's editors bitterly joke: "Many times in the evening we "sketch and paint" (in Vietnamese way it means "make up" or "improvise") the whole paper!" (Interviewee 16).

It is not clear who decided what and what not the newsroom editors should do. But with such workload, and the news flow as mentioned earlier, it is not surprising that they do not have quality time for strategic thinking. Therefore, there is a need for clear job description for each position, especially for the newsroom editors as the newsroom is the important hub of the production. Tien Phong has realised that and has actually composed a document with job descriptions. This will be discussed in the next section.

Another reason for this situation, according to some interviewees including the senior journalist cited above, is the fact that good reporters are promoted/moved to the newsroom to work as editors whether or not they are suitable for editing job. According to the newsroom chief editor, “Tien Phong has people, then it tries to find the structure that fits the people, not the other way around.” Similarly, another respondent claims “Instead of defining jobs/work and finding the right people suitable for the jobs, they try to find jobs for existing people”.

This respondent also says that there are no criteria for choosing people. Moreover, it is very unclear system/structure. According to this person, beside the departments, there are<sup>102</sup> some content “groups” and no one knows why they are called “groups” instead of “departments”<sup>103</sup>. He continues:

“The head of the ABC group (which is me) has been promoted to “deputy head of department” since January 2006 having no idea who I am “deputy” to, or “deputy” until when! The same with Mr D and Ms E.”

### **1.2.2. Strategy implementation and results**

#### ***Personnel changes***

As mentioned, then he came to the office, the new leader/editor-in-chief Doan Cong Huynh thoughts that there are a lot of internal conflicts due to the organisation's lack of concrete aims. Therefore, the general common aims were decided: to increase the circulations, advertisements and readers. Using the common aims and believing in giving priority to change the personnel before changing content, he rearranged (and still does) key positions with the hope to change the current frustrating and conflicting atmosphere.

The personnel rearrangement in the beginning of 2009 was considered by many staffs as "revolutionary" or “full blood change” as it involved appointing two (out

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<sup>102</sup> It is noted that the survey was done just after the new editor in chief came to office, meaning the information given by the respondents was correct until then and continued to be correct until there was/is, if any, a change initiated by the chief. This thesis, as mentioned earlier, was done during that interesting changing time. Therefore, I use the same tenses that the respondents used (present tenses) in this research report.

<sup>103</sup> In Vietnamese, in an institutional context, the term “group” means a unit lower in ranking (not necessarily smaller in size) compared to the term “office” (phòng) which, in turn, is sometimes lower and sometimes could be higher than “department” (ban). There are even some other words all of which are usually translated to English as “department”.

of three total) deputy editors-in-chief, 25 totally new middle management positions including heads and deputy heads of departments (as replacement for some current left for other newspapers during the restructuring, and some removed from their positions) and a totally new newsroom secretariat, the head of which, the newsroom chief editor, had been working as deputy head of department of science and education which, in Vietnamese daily or general interest newsrooms, is usually not considered an important department.

These "brave" changes have made some journalists hopeful about a better workplace (interviewees 16, 18, 29). But they have also led to the quitting of some key reporters and editors soon after the new editor-in-chief came into his office, as well as the resign of the newsroom chief editor after a year of the "restructuring to improve the quality of Tien Phong newspaper" project, and a lot of doubts about the rest of the management by the staff (interviewee 17).

Except for the consequence that some key journalists quit as a protest to this "blood change", which happened right after the action, the result of this strategy was not made clear until later, after other strategies were implemented as well, we will look at it again later to identify the reason for the failure.

### ***Changing systems and procedures***

Beside the personnel appointments, in order to cope with the fact that the work and report flow was not clearly defined causing frustration to reporters and editors as well as administrative staffs, the newspaper started to audit its work procedures and regulatory framework.

At organisational level, during my fieldwork, I was told by the R&D manager that there had been no official job description or regulatory document. As a result of the staff survey, the R&D department, together with the newsroom, started to build the newspaper's systematic internal documents to replace the old scatted documents that had not been used or even hardly known among the staff. The most important document is the "internal regulatory guideline" that covers the organisation's vision and mission, job/position and department function description, report hierarchy, meeting mechanism, training issue, recruitment, appointment and lay-off, praise and sanction mechanism. The purpose of this



document is to make it clear for everyone in the organisation who should do what in order to avoid disputes/conflicts.

The draft was sent to the staffs for comments but very few feedbacks were received which might show the lack of interest by the staffs. The paper was officially signed and circulated in mid-2010 without amendment. The biggest problem of this document, according to the some interviewees, is the section about praises and sanctions which is considered too general - it is only stated that the editor-in-chief, together with Tien Phong's Praise and Sanction Board, decides the terms while such board and such terms do not exist so far.

This means most likely the document will end up the same way as the previous ones – ineffective. For instance, according to the organisation's regulatory document, reporters must report to their head of department their story ideas for the day before 9am. They have to report to the head of department when they go to meetings and/or press conferences, etc. This rule is good, as it helps avoid the situation when more than one reporter from the same department go to the same event to cover it<sup>104</sup>. However, as there is no framework for sanctions, many reporters do not obey this rules (interviewees 16, 19, 29) and, thus, heads of departments, also without their own plans, have nothing or little to report to the newsroom during the morning meetings, which, in turn, means newsroom editors have to wait until late without knowing what they will or will not have for the issue (interviewees 16, 20)

Also, according to my observation, even if the reporters do report to their bosses before 9 o'clock, the heads of departments or their representatives never report to the newsroom and other departments during the morning meetings about the arrangements in their departments. This means it could still happen that reporters from different departments can still go to the same news event, meaning waste of time and resources, as well as possible content overlapping in the later stage of production.

Moreover, regarding job descriptions, there is some confusion already in the regulatory paper. According to the regulation:

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<sup>104</sup> Companies/institutions PR people often send invitations to individual journalists. Therefore more than one journalist from the same department or newspaper might get invitation to the same event.

Reporters do professional assignments given by and are accountable to their department's boss(s), but work under the guidance/instructions of the editorial board (not the newsroom secretariat).

Newsroom secretariat is the sector that everyday helps the editorial board in running the daily newspaper production, under the instructions of the editorial board. It is the department that takes “the final responsibility” *in the production chain that must be complied with by all involved sectors*. It is responsible for planning and producing the daily newspaper. It coordinates the activities of the content departments, representative offices, correspondents and technical sectors to plan for the newspaper issues.

Daily, the newsroom secretariat has to make a plan for the next issue based on the proposals of the content and other supporting departments. Its role is to obtain an overview of what is going on every day. It also must monitor the inputs, outputs and the process in order to make sure the proposed plans are done.

It could be interpreted from the paper that the newsroom (secretariat) only has the power to coordinate the other departments, not decide the content of each department.

However, the paper also says that the newsroom secretariat is supposed to “edit the news and features, as well as build/establish pages (content and layout), and are responsible for checking the accuracy of the information! Newsroom secretaries /editors also are supposed to propose story ideas daily and weekly, and propose commendation and punishments associated with the newspaper's issues.

The content departments are considered an important middle or intermediate management part of the organization. The heads are in charge of the personnel within their departments; planning for and covering their subject field(s); developing and reporting daily and weekly story plans; organizing work within their departments. And importantly, the content departments are working under the instructions given by the editorial board AND coordination by the newsroom (secretariat).

The problem is that no one knows what “under the coordination by the newsroom secretariat” means (interviewees 19, 29). Another issue is, taking into account the fact that the newsroom is not superior to the departments and the fact that both

newsroom and the departments are responsible to plan for and organize news production, whose decisions should be final in case of conflicts/disagreement?

Also, according to the regulatory document, departments must write, edit, double-check the news and feature items for facts and house styles, and approve them BEFORE sending them to the newsroom, meaning the departments must send “clean copies” to the newsroom (secretariat).

The question raised here is: so, what is the role of the newsroom secretariat? They surely decide how the items appear on the newspaper (layout), and have a more overview plan for the whole paper, not just one or two pages as in case of departments. But what else can they do? Can they interfere with the copies? What if their plan and the departments’ plans do not fit?

Currently, the newsroom secretaries spend most of their working time editing existing copies, deciding what are published and what not, where and how to publish the items, etc. They do not have time and, according to the interviewed reporters and heads of departments, competence to do issue-led planning and give directions to journalists. It seems to me that there are differences and confusions in the editorial board’s and the journalists’ ways of understanding about the role of the newsroom secretariat.

Regarding the newsroom chief editor, the regulation is even more confusing. According to it, the newsroom chief editor is the leader of the newsroom/newsroom secretariat. Among other things, which are quite blurring, he is responsible to:

- Develop long and short term content strategies and action plans for the daily paper
- Balance positive and negative content on the front page
- cooperate with the business bloc manager to promote distribution, advertising and other business activities to improve readership and increase incomes for the organization
- establish personnel and production policies and production process
- establish a smooth production flow and directly coordinates the daily newspaper production at the top level.

- decide royalties according to royalty policies (which in fact do not officially exist)
- *And strangely*: “establish two-way communication with every single person involved in the news production machine.” “After receiving information/reports from the content department, discussing with the newsroom leaders (meaning his deputies), he “directly (or delegates other newsroom leaders to) discusses with and gives assignments to heads of departments, individual reporters and the whole system in appropriate ways in order to create optimum /best audience-oriented daily news items.” He is also supposed to establish an easy-to-implement, effective and cohesive information flow.

As such, it could be understood that the newsroom chief editor has the power of the top leader in terms of daily content production. However, the description of the departments’ responsibilities and vague terms such as “coordinate” could challenge this way of understanding. In short, it is very difficult to fully understand the regulation as it is quite conflicting and, in some places, vague. Probably that is the reason why there are still so many conflicts between journalists/departments and the newsroom (secretariat) and its head. Thus, in short, in terms of communication, **the official document does not fulfill its tasks as it sends confusing messages**. Another reason for the failure is the fact that **it did not attract feedback (or upward communication)** while the regulations were being made, meaning the strategy/change proposed did not reflect the wishes of the staffs. This confirms the literature that upward communication has been found one of the strongest correlates of change management (Gray 2004).

At newsroom level, also some regulatory documents have been issued. This will be discussed in the next section.

### *Newsroom and newswork re-structured*

Just after starting his new job, the newsroom chief editor<sup>105</sup> did a very careful and quite systematic research about the newsroom. He surveyed all the scattered regulatory papers and their usage/effectiveness and found that almost all the

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<sup>105</sup> who was working as a deputy head of an unimportant department while appointed newsroom chief editor by the editor in chief. This appointment was a failure as mentioned above and will be discussed in more details later

documents are fully or partly ineffective and some even “died” immediately after they were issued. He also carefully examined the “old” work flow to find out the “holes” or the problems and suggested the solutions.

Based on the findings of his newsroom research, the newsroom chief editor proposed restructuring the newsroom, merging the editing and technical groups<sup>106</sup>. The change includes a physical move where newsroom managers, editors, copy editors, designers and technicians move from different floors to the same one which now even hosts the morning meeting between the newsroom editors and heads of departments. This "production value chain convergence", according to the chief, would give him opportunity to faster interfere with all the steps/elements as well as help the elements in the chain interact/cooperate with each other quicker and more efficiently. The newsroom was also provided with more staffs, both technical and editing, including two newsroom deputy chief editors.

He also produced, and having them signed by the editor in chief, a series of detailed temporary regulatory documents concerning the newsroom such as: newsroom work and report flow, newsroom jobs descriptions, temporary newsroom personnel arrangements and assignments, deadline system, etc., details as follows:

- Clear work division (mostly in terms of time namely daily, weekly, and monthly) among the newsroom deputy chief editors: chairing morning meetings, marking royalties, proposing outstanding articles for commendation/bonus money.
- Work division among all the editors in the newsroom: the leaders are divided according to subject fields and the other editors according to the pages. However, it seems that the newsroom secretary has problems dividing work that come from other areas than Hanoi/headquarters. Instead of sticking to the subject fields/pages, each newsroom member editor is assigned to some geographical regions/areas. This implies possible overlapping and/or information missing due to the lack of expertise and, thus, the lack of interest in subjects that are not familiar with them.

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<sup>106</sup> As mentioned before, the “technical” department was independent from the newsroom before.

- Detailed to-do-lists with timeline for each position in the newsroom, especially the editing staffs.
- New production flow with detailed descriptions and concrete tasks and deadlines for each person involved.
- Detailed timeline (for the newsroom, meaning all editing and layout/design should be done by then) for different content/pages.

Beside the job descriptions for every member of the newsroom, the newsroom chief editor also carried some other important changes as follows:

The new design/format of the daily requires new "editing format" including dealing with headlines and leads which are now shorter and direct, as well as shorter articles.

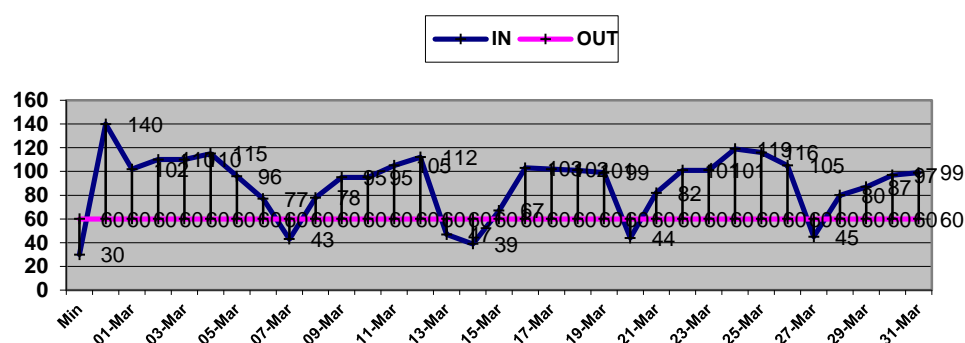
All the designers, who previously did the layout on paper dummies and who worked individually on shifts, now do the layout on computers and everyone has to use the same computerised format, which stops the layout inconsistency in the past.

The in-out flows of articles are also changed toward a more professional and stricter way, according to the newsroom's proposal and report. All ins and outs are processed during the day to avoid missing important news as before. The process is: Items are received and documented by the newsroom administrative secretary, categorised by newsroom chief editor (head of newsroom)'s assistant, initially approved (or rejected) by the newsroom chief editor who might comment and/or require changes to the articles, edited by subject-based editors/secretaries, then the edited copies are approved again by the newsroom chief editor before being approved/rejected by the editor-in-chief or one of his two deputies (either the permanent or the content deputy editor-in-chief, not the one in charge of the magazines).

With each of the items that are not used or need changing/adding, a note from the editor which explains the reasons and/or suggestions will be attached. All the notes are gathered and feedback given weekly by the newsroom chief editor's assistant. This feedback system aims at boosting the reporters' inputs and outputs and responding to the reporters and content departments complaints about their articles not being published and they have no clues why.

The newsroom chief editor's assistant also makes and circulates the statistics of the in and out quantities every week or month. The statistics is sent together with detailed account of the numbers of articles submitted by each reporter and each department. The purpose is to keep everyone including the leaders/managers informed of the journalists' productivity. The following is one example:

**Figure 12: Number of articles received (in) and published (out) - March 2010**



It is noted that, to my knowledge, in Vietnam probably only Tien Phong is doing statistics about newsroom's inputs and outputs on a more or less every day basis and circulating the statistics to every journalist in the organisation weekly like this.

This strategy first led to "huge success" at the beginning. Reporters produced much more than usual. However, after a short while the number of articles sent to the newsroom was fewer and fewer (interviewee 16). This was due to the fact that there was no sanctions if a reporter did not produce as much, and many articles were not published which made the reporters frustrated and give up. This will be discussed more in the section about change management.

### ***Pages control moved over from newsroom to departments' hands***

As mentioned in section 2, the tensions/conflicts of power between the newsroom (secretariat) and the journalists and their departments have forced the organisation to start experimenting a solution: "transferring/handling the pages to the departments".

This means a head of department has responsibility and power to plan and decide his/her page's content, edit the articles and manage his/her reporters. If the experiment is successful, it will mean gradually flattening the hierarchy as, then, the heads of departments will become editors in the newsroom and work directly with reporters - a model seen often in many western newsrooms.

It seems most journalists and departments are excited about this step as they are frustrated with the newsroom's involvement and they believe that the heads of departments, as long as they are the right people for the position, have expertise in the subject fields. However, they are still not sure how this will mean in terms of administration and organisational structure. In fact no one knows yet and people are guessing that the heads of departments should still report to a newsroom chief editor who should have a strategic overview of the whole publication.

This strategy was suggested some years ago, was in more intense discussion for the whole year 2009 but the process did not really start until end of 2009 beginning of 2010. Therefore it is still a bit early to know exactly if it works.

### ***Improving organizational communication and cooperation***

Realising that this situation of poor cooperation is not good for Tien Phong as it prevents synergy, the editor-in-chief wants to improve it. He introduces higher bonus for better and deeper news coverage. He himself always acts nicely to all the staff which is liked by many younger journalists (interviewees 16, 17, 23, 31) but also receives some criticism that he is too "soft" for "such a strong-headed group" meaning those "strong-head" people would not respect his instructions (interviewee 29).

However, probably as the situation was so frustrating before that his coming has brought new and fresh wind to the stagnant environment which everyone wanted to change, many people are optimistic and hopeful (interviewee 17, 18, 23, 30). It is seen that the current atmosphere is better than before the editor in chief came to office.



*A small extract from a morning meeting: Conversation between a newsroom deputy chief editor and a head of department:*

- What do you have for today?
- Still the environment summit. There was a press conference yesterday afternoon. I am gonna have a special interview item. Submitting soon.
- Was it an exclusive interview?
- No, of course not, it was a press conference! How the hell could I have an exclusive interview?

*(everyone else was laughing)*

- Then, what angle are you taking?
- Well, I have my way.

*(End of the conversation.)*

*....Later on, in the newsroom:  
The newsroom deputy chief editor with the administrative secretary:*

- Special! Special! Who the fuck knows what “special” is!

The journalists are encouraged to cooperate more and they also see the benefits of working in teams. They cooperate for the common good (interviewees 17, 18, 22, 27). However, **the old culture of little cooperation and communication is strong, and the personal relationships have not improved** much and, therefore, cooperation usually only happens when there are big news events (interviewees 14, 17, 22). In such cases, either the editor in chief himself or one of the two deputies, or even some delegated head of department, works as the leader of a group of journalists to cover the event. Nevertheless, even then, each reporter would do a specific angle, quite independently from the others. The group leader then would just discuss with the group and decide who should do what angle: “A goes to the court; B does an interview item with the police; C goes to the scene; etc”. There is usually little detailed discussion how each reporter should do their angle, leaving

possibly a lot of “aftermath” work for newsroom editors who have to edit the different stories, try to make sense of them and put them together in a cohesive way.

It is noted that Maestro concept (see chapter III and VII) was introduced to Tien Phong in 2005 by some Swedish journalists in the Sida's project<sup>107</sup> and the permanent deputy editor in chief wanted to apply it to the news work but no one else really took it seriously.

The editor in chief also wants to improve the cooperation between the online and the print daily but the strategy is first to improve the quality of the online newspaper, like in case of the print paper, by having a more audience-oriented approach - changing the writing style and tone to make the content more juicy and attractive, and providing more human-interest and lifestyle content.

Only after that, according to the editor-in-chief, the print reporters will see the benefits of cooperating with the online department, as well as the online department will see the benefits of having contribution from the print resources (as now the head of online department enjoys the autonomy he has and does not want to involve the print newsroom). As it is now, they are only encouraged to do so and there are no sanctions if they do not. Therefore, the strategy is to encourage and "educate the staff about online/electronic media" (including online media culture and economic benefits). According to the chief of the online department, even though he cannot give orders to the print staffs and they still prefer to publish their articles on the print paper as that give higher royalty, it is easier and easier to ask print reporters do cover stories for the online version as communication is made easier than before and reporters realize that the online paper is one important channel for them to compete (professionally) with other newspapers (interviewee 22).

The regional cooperation is also better (Interviewee 29). However, this also only happens in big news events, not on an everyday basis as, according to the reporter, "Journalists' self-esteem is too big to cooperate".

Journalists both in headquarter and representative office realize that cooperation helps their news coverage deeper and wider. In the potentially big news events, the journalists see the benefits of cooperation: the articles are bigger, the quality of the article(s) is better as they are more informative, geographically and perspectively wider and deeper, and the chance to get commendation and bonuses

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<sup>107</sup> See Appendix 1 for more background

is higher. (The newspaper, like others, offers bonus money/awards to outstanding articles).

However, the cooperation is usually not a result of individual journalists' initiatives, which is the case of Tuoi Tre. It is more in this way: the newsroom "places orders" to reporters from different regions and then gather the articles and rewrite them into a bigger story. In such cases, the reporters do see and appreciate the role of the newsroom editors. However, the interviewees also say that only some of the newsroom editors can do a good job in this regard (interviewees 25, 29).

Generally, the relationship between the newsroom and the reporters/departments are still tense. There is more, but still not enough, interaction and discussion between the departments and newsroom editors, according to the survey respondents and interviewees.

### **1.2.3. Change management, the issues of leadership and communication**

As mentioned earlier, the new editor in chief's "revolutionary" decision to "change the blood" of the newspaper has led to anger from quite many staffs and hopes from the others who really want a change to the stagnant organisation.

However, when it comes to the everyday dealing in the newsroom, the editor in chief seems to take a much softer approach, believing in "internal unity" and encouragement especially while dealing with conflicts, disputes and grievances. This approach, however, to my observation and according to some interviewees (15, 17, 24, 29), has created confusion and, in some cases, further frustration among the concerned staffs instead of dissolve it. It can be concluded that **inconsistent leadership** has contributed to the failure of change.

The lower level of leadership – the newsroom chief editor who is supposed to lead the whole production on day-to-day basis – has also proved to be a failure as he was **appointed the tasks that do not fit his abilities, skills and expectations** from the staff.

Regarding the newsroom's strategies, according to the newsroom chief editor's assistant, at first, it really worked well. Immediately the number of articles sent to

the newsroom increased sharply. However, after less a year, it has gone down again because:

- Many of their articles are not published (which shows that the statistics is only statistics meaning it can only impose quantity, not necessarily quality); and
- There are no punishments to those who do not perform.

On the other hand, the assistant says, reporters have become also more careful and selective when writing and submitting to the newsroom as they have learnt a lesson from a long time submitting articles that could not be published.

More recently, even the statistics collection is also relaxed as it seems to lose the effect.

The newsroom secretariat also proposed and got approved their content plans including new or changed sections or pages, but due to the lack of opportunities and/or capacity to exercise his power (mentioned in section 3 above and later in this section) the newsroom secretaries/editors could only implement the strategies/proposals that involve the newsroom staff.

For 9 months, with the support (in principle only – to be discussed more later) from the editor-in-chief and editorial board, the newsroom chief editor worked every day non-stop from morning to 8 or 10 pm (sometimes he even slept in his workplace instead of going home) with the hope to make the new working style become strong habits for everyone in the newsroom. He read every article sent to the newsroom (about 100 a day), made weekly, monthly and quarterly content plans and sent them to the concerned content departments as well as other members of the newsroom. He urged everyone in the organisation to build and send him their working plans. He on his own developed ideas of reader-oriented content strategies to boost the newspaper's popularity and, thus, sales, and gave detailed assignments to different departments and even individual journalists. He kept close contact with individual journalists who got the assignments everyday giving them advices and sometimes helping them to find background information and contacts, etc.

In short, the newsroom chief editor was, and still is, very engaged with every single work. To my observation, he seems to have done a good job in many

aspects in a systematic way even though in some other fields he seems to have managed to only copy the “package” instead of the “essence” or the “content” of certain western theoretical frameworks.

However, whether or not the staffs appreciate his attempts and whether or not the strategies and tactics he proposed and got approved by higher bosses would be successful is another question.

My interviews and observation show that many journalists do not like him even some do acknowledge that he is quite competent in many aspects. Some heads of departments even seem to hate him and, thus, protest almost whenever he says something. Therefore, cooperation is very difficult. In details, his mistakes include:

- Trying to control everything. As mentioned earlier, he directly involves in processing every single story, gives directions to reporters directly, interferes with editing work etc. The consequences of this, in turn, include:
  - He does not have enough time and subject expertise to do each task well which also upsets the journalists and the concerned department’s head;
  - He does not have enough time to do strategic planning;
  - He is hated by reporters as they do not like being instructed by someone they believe do not have expertise in their fields; by heads of departments for the same reason and for the fact that he surpasses them when working directly with their staffs; and by other newsroom editors – his own staffs as he interferes with their work.
- In terms of **communication**, his mistakes include:
  - Regarding the copy/news flow, instead of making it shorter and more direct, and, thus, avoiding “noises”/disturbance, i.e. miscommunication or misunderstanding meaning editing wrongly which is upsetting to the journalists, his interference, which is not persuasive enough to the journalists as they believe he does not have enough expertise in their fields; makes it even more complicated;
  - His way of communicating with other journalists is considered “patronising”, “arrogant”, “annoying”. A lot of journalists complain about his giving instructions without knowing their subjects well enough. Some others, who work more closely with him, explain that his hot-

tempered personality makes people think he is arrogant and, thus, react negatively. Others say that “he says we need to cooperate but his teamwork skill is terrible.”

All these lead to the fact that, as mentioned above, journalists do not obey or cooperate with him or the newsroom in general. He is totally isolated. According to a senior reporter, the journalists react this way: “Ok man, if you want to do all, I will let you do it all. I am not gonna f’king care. Let’s see how you manage.” (interviewee 29).

In such case, even the editor in chief cannot support him any more even if he wants to. The editor in chief once told him: “You have everything but people’s acceptance” (Interviewee 15).

As a result of all this, as the newsroom chief editor does not want to accept his failure, he has to try even harder, working on his own. It is a full circle. Finally, he realises that he is not suitable for the job and, thus, has propose resignation twice, but so far has not been approved by the editor in chief.

From the newsroom chief editor’s perspectives, he is very sad about the situation and the fact that he is hated by almost everyone. He complains about the fact that he is assigned to a high position without being empowered: “I possess the “acting newsroom chief editor” title and a “deputy head of department” power, meaning I cannot direct other departments and the head of my department.” As such, **empowerment is also an issue** that needs to be considered in newsroom management.

Another important issue is **strategy communication** which is found the strongest correlate of change management (Gray 2004).

When asked about Tien Phong’s strategies, one of the leading and prestigious journalists says: “Tien Phong’s strategies? Well, just to increase the circulation, what else?” “That’s the aim/goal, not strategy” “Oh, no idea what the differences are! (laughing). Then you should ask those big guys. How the hell do we reporters know?”

Another reporter says: “I have no clue. Only probably that to improve the quality of journalists’ articles”. “How?” “Well, that was said generally by the bosses. How on earth can I know in details?” “Then, how do YOU improve your

articles?” “Well, just by paying more attention... Where the hell can I find time to sit there and think about steps to improve the quality? My articles are already of very high quality, how can I even make it higher?” (*joking*). The reporter also says that the “articles quality improvement” requirement was just mentioned in a casual and general way by the bosses with no clear guidelines provided.

Most journalists (reporters and copy editors) give similar answers, confirming that the leader’s strategies and expectations are not communicated well, if at all, to the staffs who are supposed to implement them. This surely affects the implementation process and results, as well as raises the question: What strategies are being implemented in the newsroom by individual staff and journalists? What goals are they trying to reach? With all the luck in the world might they share the same ones with the leader!

However, some journalists-middle managers are more aware of the strategies who claim that, according to the bosses, “content should be more down to earth, meaning closer to people’s everyday life”. This is consistent with the content strategy pursued by the management (see more in chapter V). However, this strategy is not officially communicated to the whole newsroom. It is confirmed that there is no official paper/guideline how to implement the strategy, as well as no complications for the journalists if they do not write more human-interest stories. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the newspaper’s Youth pages, which are about light-hearted issues, are usually considered by the staff as “rubbish” and the journalists from the youth department are not really as appreciated as those from more “political” departments such as Current News or Economic.

Having said that, it is not correct to say that Tien Phong’s reporters are not changing in their writing styles or approaches meaning still writing “hard core” political or reception news and features. Even though there are no official documents or announcements from the bosses about what kind of topics the newspaper should or should not cover and how they should be done, etc. reporters have realized that they have to write more human-interest stories as:

- They are simply more interesting to read.
- If they keep sending their old-style articles to the newsroom, they will be rejected by the editors. Therefore, slowly they have to adapt. As such, the

content strategy is still implemented by the reporters, but it takes much more time and brings more frustration than in case it would be communicated well to the staffs right from the beginning.

- They also compare Tien Phong with what they call “yellow papers” in terms of content and circulation, and admit that they have to change to attract readers but at the same time maintain being serious enough not to become another of “the kind”.

One of the areas that many Tien Phong’s journalists have been proud of and always wanted to keep doing is fighting corruption and wrong-doings. Fortunately, according to some senior journalists, Tien Phong is still doing quite well in this field compared to many other newspapers, taking into account the recent media clampdowns by high-level politicians.

To my observation, during this period of time when the biggest political-economic-social newspapers being Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien, like many other mostly southern newspapers that were involved in the media clamp-downs, are heavily affected and, thus, considerably tone down their fight against corruption and power abuse, Tien Phong is taking an interesting, brave and, thus, risky move, with an attempt to reinforce and improve their reputation and circulation: They actually do the opposite – pushing forward against corruption in the shipping corporation Vinashin, one of the biggest state-owned companies meaning hitting politicians of ministry level and even higher (politburo) as there are always connections between the politicians and such companies.

As it is a “big” and “hot” issue, an action team is established headed by the head of the economic department. They together plan and divide the work and stories angles so a series of related articles are done more or less at the same time and published in a row.

In such boring media environment at the time, Tien Phong’s aggression is welcomed by the audience and liked by its own journalists (interviewees 15, 17, 25, 26). The journalists involved (mostly the most important content departments



such as political and economic as well as the newsroom editors) as well as other staffs are enthusiastic and to some extent more united than usual<sup>108</sup>.

This shows that the organization is most likely to be able to fix its internal conflicts if there are common goals and common processes that everyone feels a part of.

In terms of design/layout, which is considered the easiest or least sensitive to change due to both political and practical reasons<sup>109</sup>, Tien Phong also has had changes such as printed in colours in the front page and sometimes the last and other pages. Before the new editor in chief came, it was totally black and white. The editor in chief, quoted by some survey respondents, said that when he started his job at Tien Phong, wherever he went, he was met with comments that Tien Phong looked very ugly and “rural” or “countryside”.

As mentioned in chapter V (page 250), since 1 January 2009 with the newsroom under the leadership of the new chief editor<sup>110</sup>, Tien Phong has had a new and, as said by the newsroom chief editor, “more modern” format and shorter articles, more and bigger pictures, graphics, fact boxes, etc. in all pages.

This decision to go colours and to change the layout is met with enthusiasm from most journalists but some are concerned about the costs of printing colours considering the newspaper’s current bad economy.

It is not clear whether the editor in chief and newsroom chief editor have consulted and/or how they have informed the staffs about the changes. Nor it is clear if they have informed the staffs about the costs and the benefits of printing colours.

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<sup>108</sup> Unfortunately the attempt was only successful for a short time. The arrest of one deputy chief news editor and the police summon of the editor in chief, as well as the later removal of the editor in chief and his close followers from their posts, are believed to be the consequences of the newspaper’s brave fight against corruption during the time all the other media toned down. Read more about this in footnote 5, chapter IV.

<sup>109</sup> See chapter II.

<sup>110</sup> Who was promoted by the new editor in chief while working as a deputy head of department (see part 5.2. for more details).

#### 1.2.4. Summary

As a new comer, Tien Phong's editor in chief soon found out that Tien Phong, which had had a quite good reputation and position in the industry, is a complicated case: sharp drops in circulation, very few advertisements, low salary, royalty and poor welfare, un-united staff with deep conflicts, low spirit and commitment, brain drain, low efficiency etc. Therefore, beside some changes necessary to the business part of the organization, the editor in chief, under support of his bosses from the Central Communist Youth Union, decides to focus on fixing the internal matters first as he believes that the existence and development of the organization can only be guaranteed by a healthy united staff.

It is found that the reasons for the conflicts among the staffs and unifficiency in production include:

- ***Organisational structure and production flow***: Unclear and hierarchical news flow and organizational structure
- ***Systems (policies and procedures)***: Lack of or unclear job descriptions, lack of clear and effective sets of news criteria, house rules with royalty, commendation and sanction policies, dispute grievance, etc., and styles guideline
- ***Task requirements and individual skills/abilities***: Poor personnel policies, e.g. casual promotions/appointments which lead to the fact that people do not respect and, thus, do not cooperate with each other.
- ***Organisational culture and work climate/relations***: Lack of disciplines and a smooth-running machine in the newsroom, unlike in case of Tuoi Tre (see chapter VII), staffs hating each other, no respect, etc.
- ***Cooperation and communication***: Very poor as a result of the culture
- ***Motivation***: Staff not motivated due to above reasons

Fully aware of the reasons, Tien Phong's bosses and staffs have been trying different strategies and actions, most of them are communicative, to respond: establishing new news flow, composing job descriptions, re-arranging or changing personnel, encouraging teamwork, etc. They believe the nature of personal contacts/relationship among journalists, which is currently quite bad as seen above, might be improved if the organizational/work relations are improved.

However, even though the communicative strategies above reflect the wishes to change of the majority of the newspaper's members, in reality, the following facts:

- ***Leadership and management practices:*** The editor-in-chief's confusing/inconsistent implicit and explicit messages (aggressive in policies at the beginning but then too "soft" during every day work – discussed earlier);
- ***System (policies and procedures):*** The editor-in-chief is new to the newsroom in particular and to the so-called "political" environment and, thus, less experienced and more reluctant in dealing with "stubborn" staffs, who, according to many interviewees, outnumber the "obedient" ones;
- ***Task requirements and individual skills/abilities:*** Bad decision made by the editor-in-chief in choosing his alliances, most importantly in choosing the newsroom secretariat and its head, who are not at all respected by the majority of the organisation's journalists with their leading/management skills including communication skills; which leads to the fact that the strategies and/or work procedures that the newsroom and its heads impose are not effective and obeyed by the staffs even though they are not necessarily against the policies themselves, etc.
- ***Strategy communication:*** no strategy communication was carried out. Staff not aware of the directions of the newspaper. Lots of tries and fails which is a waste of time and resources.

have, in my view, more or less destroyed the initial successes of Tien Phong's change attempts and created a very chaotic situation in the newsroom in particular and the whole organisation in general: no one listens to the others, it is difficult to work in teams/groups, especially cross-department, offenders do not get fines or punishments, no transparent, at least according to the staff's perception, mechanism for sanctions and achievement acknowledgement: Therefore, there is a total lack of motivation among the staff, which at the end of the day leads to frustration and lack of commitment and contribution to the common good.

As such, in my view, Tien Phong during this period under the leadership of this editor-in-chief and his alliances is a typical case of communication failure and this has affected its ability to implement strategic changes.

## 2. CASE 2: TUOI TRE

### 2.1. Introduction<sup>111</sup>

Tuoi Tre was established in 1975 in Ho Chi Minh City (south Vietnam, the biggest city) where it still has its headquarter. At the moment, the newspaper/organisation has 9 representative offices in the big cities: Hanoi, Nghe An, Hue, Da Nang, Quy Nhon, Nha Trang, Da Lat, Daklak, Can Tho. Its daily is printed at the same time in 7 cities/towns.

Initially the newspaper was published weekly with only 5000 copies. It did not become daily until 2006 when it started to publish the Sunday issue as well (Le 2008c). Since 2007 Tuoi Tre daily has 20 content pages and before that it had 16.

Tuoi Tre daily has been the leading newspaper in terms of circulation ever soon after it was born. Currently its circulation is about 450-470,000 copies per issue and the number has been quite stable since around 2008 with the peak was over 500,000 copies and the downturn of less than 400,000 in late 2009.

The daily is published with two advertising supplementaries:

- “Your information pages” – published nationally
- “Quick ads pages” – published regionally

The average number of ads pages as of late 2009 was 40. As of May 2011 it is around 80 pages per issue.

Beside the daily, Tuoi Tre also has the following publications:

1. Weekly Tuoi Tre Cuoi Tuan (Tuoi Tre Weekend). This publication was born already in 1983 originally called Tuoi Tre Sunday with a circulation of 20,000 copies per issue. In 2006 its name was changed to Tuoi Tre Weekend as the daily also started publishing on Sunday. Currently Tuoi Tre

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<sup>111</sup> For Tuoi Tre’s history, see Le, V. N. (2008a). Duyen no nghe bao- Bai 2: Hoai thai mot to bao tre. Tuoi Tre. Ho Chi Minh City, Tuoi Tre Newspaper: <http://tuoitre.vn/Chinh-tri-Xa-hoi/Phong-su-Ky-su/276418/Duyen%20no%20nghe%20bao---Bai-2-Hoi-thai-mot-to-bao-tre.html>.

, Le, V. N. (2008b). Nhung nam thang xuong duong lam bao. Tuoi Tre. Ho Chi Minh City, Tuoi Tre Newspaper.

, Le, V. N. (2008c). Thach thuc va ky vong voi Tuoi Tre. Dien dan nghiep vu bao chi (Vietnam Journalism), <http://vietnamjournalism.com>.

The current circulation numbers of Tuoi Tre’s different publications are provided by its Advertising Department in April 2011.

Weekend's circulation is around 65,000 while in its peak time 1990 it was over 130,000 copies.

2. Tuoi Tre Cuoi: born in 1984 as a monthly paper with a circulation of 50,000 copies which quickly rose to 250,000 copies later that year. However, this publication's circulation has dropped and currently it is about 135,000 copies per issue.
3. Tuoi Tre Online (TTO): first published in 2003. Currently TTO has more than 4 million clicks/reach every day.
4. Ao Trang: montly magazine for teenagers.
5. Tuoi Tre mobile: which is the TTO version for mobile phone users
6. Tuoi Tre Media Online: which is an online multimedia publication that closely associates with TTO

Unlike most of the other newspapers in Vietnam, Tuoi Tre's leadership style over its history seem to have had high "entrepreneurship spirit" as the organisation started its business-related activities beside the content production just a few years after its foundation. And as early as in 1985 while the whole country was still under state subsidised system Tuoi Tre already became financially independent (Le 2008a).

Tuoi Tre has a total staff of around 400. However, most of them are non-content. In late 2009, according to its managing editor (or newsroom chief editor – who is highest after the editorial board that consists of editor-in-chief and his deputies in the newspaper's content part), Tuoi Tre had 120 journalists out of the 400 total. However, in January 2010 the managing editor said that they had just checked again and it turned out that the paper had only 90 active journalists as many were either on training/education, or sick, or on leaves, etc.

To my observation, Tuoi Tre is considered the biggest (in terms of circulation and influence) and one of the most (if not most) reputable newspapers in Vietnam. It is respected and many journalists want to work there because it is considered to have good working/professional environment, fair treatment and offers good income and professional education. We shall now examine the newspaper's from the inside to find out what make them so successful and if they have any problems that need fixing.

## **2.2. Newsroom efficiency management**

The difference between Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong is that the real leadership is at newsroom level as the editor in chief and his deputies are there mainly for political reasons and even though they do control the content<sup>112</sup>, the whole production is run by newsroom chief editor and his deputies who have been doing the same job for many years. So even though both newspapers have new top leaders more or less at the same time, Tuoi Tre's production machine has been stable and established and needs little revolutionary changes while Tien Phong is undergoing more or less fundamental "revolution" with the coming of the new editor in chief. This makes it difficult to compare the cases. However, to answer the research questions and for the purpose of this research about newsroom management, we shall look at both factors that are believed by Tuoi Tre's staff as good and those that are the problems that affecting the newsroom efficiency.

### **2.2.1. Factors contributing to efficiency**

Most journalists interviewed say they are generally happy working at Tuoi Tre as it has a very friendly, democratic and professional working environment where they can raise their voice and freely discuss different issues with bosses and colleagues. They like and respect the leader (the chief news editor). They enjoy the status of an employee for a big and prestigious news house (interviewees 37, 42, 43, 46). They earn good income, enough not to have to write for competitors and are treated fair (interviewees 38, 41, 114). However, they believe there are still a lot to improve within each factor.

Tuoi Tre is considered to have the strongest staff in Vietnamese news media industry, as it offer high pays and good working environment and, thus, can draw good journalists from other media houses. However, Tuoi Tre has also been suffering from brain drain as a lot of its experienced staffs/middle managers and reporters have left to be editors-in-chief or for other high status and high income positions in other media, especially the "market" ones as of more current years. In this regard, according to some Tuoi Tre's managers, the newspaper cannot do anything about it, as it cannot promote everyone to be its top leaders. As such,

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<sup>112</sup> See chapter III about the selection of the case studies for more details

Tuoi Tre has been called “a good training camp” for journalists who want to prosper in the field.

These factors are believed to contribute to the journalists’ motivation and satisfaction. They will be discussed in more details in the next sections to avoid being isolated from their context.

Thanks to its strong economy, Tuoi Tre maintains a generous and close relationship with its content contributors and sources, especially the high-status/prestigious experts and good freelancers, which contributes to its success.

### **2.2.2. Problems hindering efficiency**

As mentioned in chapter III, I was fortunate to be able to use the discussions by Tuoi Tre’s middle managers recorded during the in-house training course about “managing newsroom”. Interestingly, right from the beginning of the course, the middle managers raised their hopes to gain/learn different things which can be divided into some categories as follows:

- Knowledge of the technological changes in journalism

#### ***Strategies***

- to survive the competition between its print and online newspapers
- How to make the weekend paper more competitive?
- Cooperation and Competition between the daily and the weekend
- How to establish and run local pages in order to find local audience.
- How to quicken the renovation process at Tuoi Tre toward more professionalism
- How to manage a convergent newsroom (print daily, online and weekend newspapers)
- How to run the weekend newsroom while having no reporters
- How to deal with the situation when there are at all no interesting news/topics?

#### ***Organisation Structure***

- How to organise, run and coordinate the headquarter together with representative offices for a smoother news flow and cooperation

#### ***News flow and work relations***

- How to improve the workflow within the organisation: improve the working relations between reporters and editors in order to avoid missing news, wasting energy and resources, as well as making mistakes, etc.
- Tuoi Tre's standardised news values and news production
- How to work better in shifts
- To learn from Swedish experience in newsrooms' cooperation
- There are many disagreements among editors and the editorial board – the leaders. How for the editors to discuss the issues?
- How to make journalists less confused by new and strange rules and regulations.

We can see that most of the hopes or concerns raised here focus on communication-related issues. It shows that Tuoi Tre's middle managers are aware of the role of communication in managing newsroom's activities and efficiency, as well as the fact that their communication practices are not perfect and need improving but they do not know how to improve them.

The following text discusses the problems identified by the journalists:

#### ***Hierarchical organizational structure, confusing job titles and conflict of power – the organizational structure versus the production flow***

*Tuoi Tre's organizational structure is as follows:*

##### ***Editorial board:***

Tuoi Tre has an editorial board, headed by the editor in chief, which consists of the editor-in-chief; four deputies, three of whom also do content but more on “macro level” meaning they basically only read all the articles to make sure they are fine politically before approving to send the content to the printing houses; and three other members including two content members.

##### ***Newsrooms (or newsroom secretariats)***



Below the editorial board there are newsrooms for different publications. The main newsroom, the daily print, has the newsroom chief editor<sup>113</sup>; 6 newsroom deputy chief editors, three of whom are in charge of the other publications and, thus, do not involve much with the daily print's work rather than some contribution to idea discussion during morning meetings, and four other editors/newsroom secretaries, each of whom deal with specific subjects and whose job is more or less like the western copy editors'.

Even though the other publications also have their own workrooms with a head, who, as mentioned earlier, has the title "newsroom deputy chief editors" in the main newsroom but do not involve with the Daily's work, and some other editors, they do not have their own reporters, and the concept "newsroom" used by Tuoi Tre people only means the Daily print newsroom.

### *Departments*

Beside the newsroom(s), there are many different content departments each consisting of a head and/or deputy heads of department and reporters who are given specific and quite narrow bids. Most departments also have one or more copy editors.

### *"Subject/field chief editor" – Tuoi Tre's "speciality"*

To my observation, unlike in most other newspapers, especially in northern Vietnam<sup>114</sup>, that I have visited, Tuoi Tre has an additional job title "subject/field chief editor", who is in charge of that field meaning he/she is supposed to have the expertise and ability to organise that subject's inputs and outputs including giving directions and assignments to the bid reporters and approve or disapprove their articles.

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<sup>113</sup> Tuoi Tre's managing editor/ newsroom chief editor/chief news editor/newsroom's general secretary

<sup>114</sup> This job title "subject/field chief editor", to my knowledge, only exists in southern newspapers. In the north, it is only used to indicate the chief editor of an edited book. In the north of Vietnam, usually there are the following positions: reporter; head and deputy head of that content department who is the chief editor of that subject field; other editors of the field, if any, who actually are first copy editors who basically only proof-read/check grammar and spelling, and do fact checks if necessary, cut/edit the articles to get the right word counts, etc. In the newsroom, there are chief newsroom editor, deputy chief newsroom editors, and other copy editors. The newsroom, but mostly the chief and/or his deputies that decide what stories should be published and how, meaning where, with or without pictures, what kinds pictures, graphics, etc. The other editors are second editors – basically do the same things as the first copy editors.

Some heads of departments are also the subject chief editors at the same time, but some are not. Some reporters and middle managers interviewed claim that it is purely for administrative purposes but they cannot explain further. One senior editor manages to explain to me that the best scenario is that the heads of departments are actually the subject chief editors, but some departments' heads are not "strong" or "good" enough to lead the whole subject. Therefore there should be someone "good" enough to do it. A very good editor can be the subject chief editor of more than one (usually smaller) department. This person might be in the newsroom or in the editorial board.

The terms "Good" or "strong" here does not only mean that the editor has enough expertise/knowledge of the subject/field and authority toward their staff. It also means "politically sensitive" enough. Therefore, for those "more sensitive" subjects such as domestic politics and economic, the subject chief editor is one of the deputy editors in chief (in the editorial board) and the heads of the departments, despite the fact that they all are very experienced journalists in the field and even have much more knowledge and sources than the subject chief editor and, thus, usually do all the job, do not have the highest decision making power in the subject. It is just another layer of self-censorship.

"Simpler" or "less sensitive" departments such as education, sports, arts and entertainment, etc. usually the heads of departments are also the subject chief editors. In a special case of education subject, however, the former head of department was the subject chief editor. But recently he was moved to the newsroom to work as a newsroom secretary, and the new head of department is considered "not yet strong enough" to decide everything relating to education subject. Therefore, the former head of the department, who is now in the newsroom, remains to be the subject chief editor. All the staffs of the department were his direct staffs, and now more or less still are. In this case, the new head of department does not have much authority and works more like an assistant to the newsroom secretary.

However, as one job title can mean people from different power levels, it creates a confusing work flow and frustrates involved people. This will be discussed further in the next sections.

### *Top leaders and their involvement in the news production*

As mentioned in chapter II, Tuoi Tre's editor in chief, indeed two other deputies as well, have political, not journalistic background. Therefore, they opt not to interfere with the production flow and structure, which is totally different from Tien Phong. The editorial board's role is more or less as checkers – to make sure Tuoi Tre does not publish “too sensitive” articles, i.e. against the Communist Party or the State or high profile politicians. They usually do not interfere with detailed journalistic work but each newspaper issue needs their signatures before going to print, meaning they have to read all the material on their duty day. Generally speaking, they do not have much to do with the news production. And reporters and editors' self-censorship and habits take over their role in most cases.

It is noted that, normally in Vietnam, the editorial board only consists of the editor in chief and his deputies. However, that of Tuoi Tre also has four more members, two of whom do content. One of the two content members is actually the newsroom editor in chief.

Probably because of the lack of journalist knowledge and skills among the top leaders, and the fact that the newsroom chief editor has a very high reputation among the journalists, the highest bosses have to impose the other content member in the editorial board to balance the power scale that might be otherwise leaning toward the newsroom chief editor<sup>115</sup>. This other content member has a decision making power over the newsroom chief editor on those days that she is on duty in the editorial board and he is on duty in the newsroom<sup>116</sup>.

The interviewed journalists, including the chief news editor (meaning the head of the newsroom's secretariat) and his staffs are quite happy with the fact that the new editor-in-chief does not interfere much with everyday work procedures and content, meaning there is no dramatic change in terms of personnel, organisation structure, work flow/procedures or other important factors namely salaries and

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<sup>115</sup> During my fieldwork there was rumour that the newsroom chief editor might become a deputy editor in chief and even the editor in chief of Tuoi Tre in the future when the current, who was said to move on soon and Tuoi Tre was just his short preparation step for a higher position in the national political hierarchy. However, until end of 2014, nothing new has happened. Especially regarding the newsroom editor in chief, for some reason that I am not aware of, has not been promoted to a higher position in Tuoi Tre.

<sup>116</sup> Read more in part 3.

wages, praises and sanctions rules and practices, etc. They like the stability, and have always been proud of Tuoi Tre as the leading media organisation and as the best example of media organisational culture in Vietnamese media industry. Also, according to all the reporters interviewed, they respect the knowledge and management skills of the chief news editor, who, in fact, together with his deputies, runs the everyday production even though some journalists believe the chief news editor is “a bit too kind”, meaning not aggressive and authoritarian enough. However, as they respect him and his journalistic skills, they usually follow his instructions, or discuss with him in a constructive and effective manner rather than discard or challenge him.

As there is not much change in terms of the organisation structure, i.e., in this case, the news production team, as well as the fact that Tuoi Tre is still number one in the market even being under more and more competition meaning the need for revolutionary change in everyday news/work flow is not urgent, the role and the need of strong leadership is less apparent and necessary than in case of Tien Phong.

*Middle managers – who is who? Who is the boss?*

Administratively/officially, i.e. in terms of official job title ranking, salary, responsibilities and obligations, incentives, etc. which must comply with the regulations for state-owned agents, Tuoi Tre’s structure is as in the chart below:

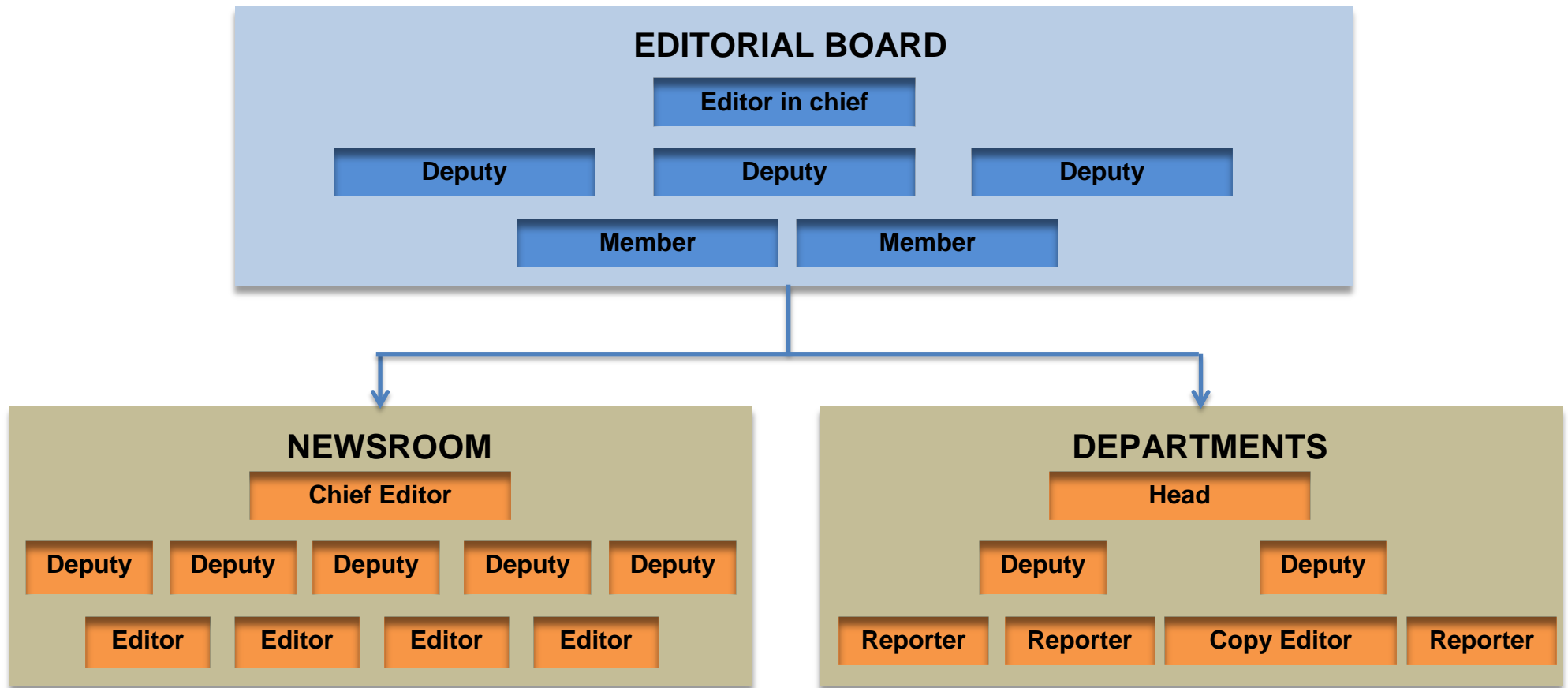
It is noted that TTO and regional representatives are considered the same level as one content department.

However, in reality, the production/working structure is more or less as in Figure 13<sup>117</sup>:

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<sup>117</sup> Diagram made by Tuoi Tre’s R&D department

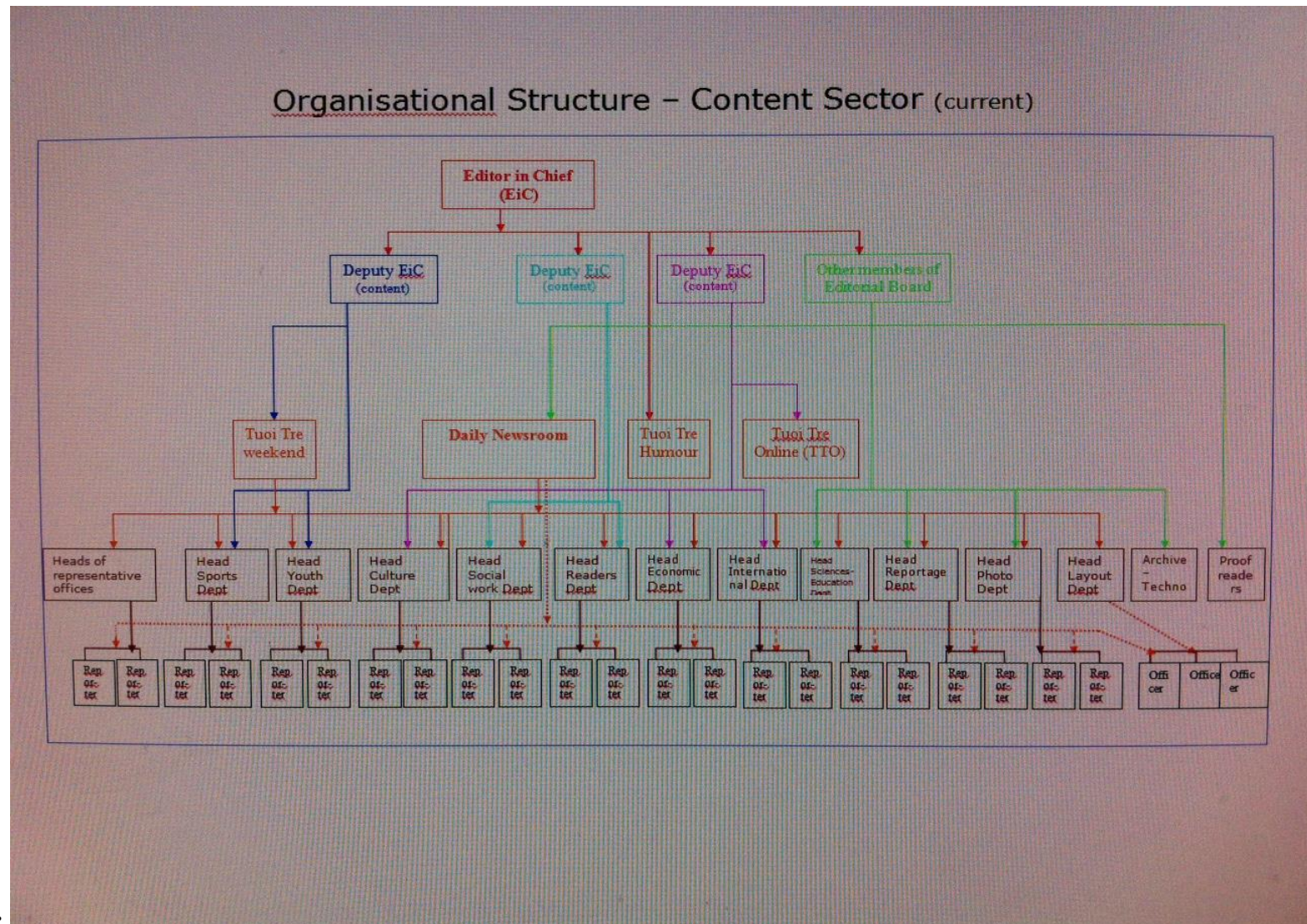
**FIGURE 13: TUOI TRE ADMINITRATIVE STRUCTURE**



Both newsroom editors including the chief news editor and the personnel officers confirm that it was very difficult to produce a precise news flow as the reality is more complicated and confusing to everyone even the most experienced journalist. It is true, as when I ask the interviewees to draw the working flow in the organisation, almost everyone has a slightly different version. Some confirm that even their own people being the personnel and R&D offices, who are authorised to map the current work flow and suggest better solution if any, have been struggling to produce one. Another interesting observation is that even though the R&D department calls the chart “news flow”, they in fact draw a downward work power structure.

But in fact, Tuoi Tre’s news flow is totally opposite. Like in most other newsrooms, story ideas either come from editors as assignments to the reporters or from reporters as proposal to their editors (heads of departments). In Tuoi Tre, reporters are encouraged to discover and develop ideas for their own stories.

Figure 14: Tuoi Tre News Flow



From the chart above one can see that Tuoi Tre's organisational structure is not very coherent and clear. In reality it is even worse. For instance, the head of the Daily Newsroom (i.e. the chief news editor or the general secretary of the newsroom) is also one member of the editorial board (one of those in the green box). Or, as mentioned earlier, some subject chief editors are in the editorial board, some are in the newsroom, and the others are also heads of departments! Some journalists have a few titles of different levels of power. Some of the interviewees say that they find it confusing and that the terms do not mean much to them as they just work on habit, meaning reporters transferring their articles to their head of department or the subject chief editor (bid editor) (if the department does not have a head) or actually anyone in the newsroom who asks<sup>118</sup>.

In fact, conflicts or potential conflicts of power or the confusion due to the lack of a clear reporting flow are very much present.

Administratively, as can be seen in Figure 22, newsroom(s) and content departments are on the same level, meaning no one is the boss of the other. Reporters are accountable to their heads/deputy heads of departments and the heads/deputies answer to the editorial board. The same in the newsrooms: newsroom editors are accountable to the newsroom chief/deputy chief editors who, in turn, answer to the editorial board.

However, in reality, as the newsrooms have the power to decide which news items are not published and which are, and how, i.e. on what page, how long, what pictures, graphics, etc., the departments have less control at the later stage of the production and, thus, become "lower" in the decision making ranking. However, beside the newsroom chief editors who has more influence, reputation and decision making power, other newsroom editors, especially the younger ones, can have problems working with reporters and the heads/deputy heads of departments as the latter do not take their orders/instructions and, thus, often challenge them. In fact, there have been quite a lot of conflicts between these two forces. However, the newsroom editors decide the later stage of the production, when the

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<sup>118</sup> In fact, when it is close to deadline, the newsroom secretaries cannot afford going through the heads of departments or bid editors. Then they have to contact the reporters directly. Given the situation, I believe the suggestion to omit the departments as administrative organs is a good one as it eliminates unnecessary middle-man involvement and, thus, time, frustration and potential misunderstanding/mistakes.



reporters and their heads of departments are not present to protest! Therefore, the reporters and departments' bosses also have to compromise. But the tension is always there and creates frustration for both parties<sup>119</sup>.

Conflicts might happen on another level, details as follows:

As it can be seen from Figure 13, all the content departments should report to the main newsroom (the Daily print) and the Weekend, but each also has a subject/field chief editor or a boss in charge who is a member of the editorial board which governs the newsrooms<sup>120</sup>. So the question is who is actually the boss - who should reporters, editors and departments listen to in case of disagreement?

It is noted again that Tuoi Tre cannot decide their own high-level managers/leaders such as editor in chief and his/her deputies and even has to ask for opinion from its owning organisations regarding assigning its chief news editor. Therefore, there currently is a quite special position occupied by a woman-editor who does not have a "deputy editor-in-chief" title but unofficially is doing a content deputy editor-in-chief's job and who has a higher decision making power than the chief news editor in their duty days if they happen to work in the same shift which is quite often. This poses a potential of conflicts in more controversial situations<sup>121</sup>. Beside the mental difficulties the two people are facing, the situation also confuses other staffs, as confirmed by the focus groups and interviewed reporters.

Also, the "green" members (actually there are only four people including the chief news editor and the "special" woman/editor. The other two do not work with content despite their editorial title) are the direct bosses/editors of both the newsroom AND five departments. Who should the five departments turn to if case there is a disagreement: the newsroom editors or the green bosses? Theoretically

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<sup>119</sup> In this regard, the situation is exactly the same as in Tien Phong (see chapter VI). However, Tuoi Tre has even more complicated structure as they have more titles/positions in between: ordinary members of the editorial board, and especially subject chief editors who can be anywhere, either editorial board, newsroom or departments.

<sup>120</sup> The member of the editorial board in charge of a department does not necessarily the subject chief editor.

<sup>121</sup> For instance, today the woman is on duty as a member of the editorial board while the chief news editor is on duty as chief news editor (chief of newsroom secretariat). Then the earlier is the boss of the latter. There is no problem on the days when the chief news editor is on duty as a member of the editorial board while one of his deputies is on duty as the chief of newsroom secretariat as the earlier is still in higher decision making than the latter.

the editorial board members are higher in position, but it is the newsrooms editors that directly work with the copies and design/layout and of course ideas as well<sup>122</sup>.

The head of Tuoi Tre Weekend is also a deputy chief news editor of the whole organisation. As such, she is officially empowered to, together with the chief, direct the rest of the newsroom and all the departments and reporters. However, as she is in charge of the Weekend, she does not involve much with the daily work and, thus, unofficially loses her power. She is the one that complains about the fact that she has to “beg” reporters from different departments to write for the Weekend as the reporters “belong” to their departments and she is not directly in charge of the departments. According to the chart, she is also the boss of all the content departments and, thus, should be able to give directions to them instead of having to chase after them begging for articles. In fact, all the departments normally take it for granted that they only “belong” to the Daily. Otherwise whose directions should they listen to in case they cannot do both?

Even more complicatedly, for instance, Sports and Youth departments share one subject editor who is one deputy editor in chief who also is in charge of the Weekend (the blue person). Whose directions should they follow: that blue person or the daily newsroom people or the other one of the editorial board members on duty<sup>123</sup>?

In short, this complicated situation with different job titles and reporting mechanism brings unnecessary conflicts, confusion and frustration and, thus, hinders smooth production flow and product quality. However, being typical Vietnamese, most people try to be nice and avoid conflicts and, thus, have to compromise. But that does not help solve the problems. Read more about these conflicts of power and their consequences in part 3 which discusses this issue more from communication perspective.

Luckily, both Tuoi Tre’s managers and staffs understand the need to change to situation. The issue and solutions have been brought up for discussion. They

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<sup>122</sup> The content of each newspaper issue needs two signatures: one from the newsroom bosses (chief newsroom editor or his four deputies) and one from the editorial board (which includes the editor in chief, three content deputies editor in chief, and two other content members) before being sent to the printing house.

<sup>123</sup> the editor in chief, three content deputy editors in chief (blue, cyan and purple) and two other members of the editorial board (green) take turn on duty

believe that they should change the organisation structure by dropping the content departments. Instead there should be only an editor or two in each subject field who should work as maestros under a bigger maestro being the newsroom chief editor or his deputies on their duty days.

The solution, according to some interviewed editors (Interviewees 34, 39, 40, 45, 49) is that all the three titles, or at least two, should be combined into one, i.e. the head of department is also the subject chief editor, and if he/she can be in the newsroom (he/she might have some copy editors as his/her assistants) it will even be better! That is what Tuoi Tre has started experimenting and what almost every journalist want to see, meaning flattening the news production hierarchy. The question is which position should be eliminated. The newsroom people want to “erase” department structure so they can work directly with the reporters. The departments want to have their heads in the newsroom.

Another problem, which happens sometimes, is the difference in news thinking among the higher bosses’ shifts. As mentioned earlier, every newspaper issue needs two signatures before going to the press: newsroom head or his deputies in charge of the day, and one duty member of the editorial board. Also as mentioned earlier, usually the editorial board members do not interfere with what have been done by the staffs accept in “sensitive cases” which are more or less accepted by everyone but at times they might assert their power in a different way, creating frustration to the involved people.

### *News flow*

The current copy (and upward power) flow is as follows<sup>124</sup>:

Reporter → head of department → copy editor (if any) → back to head of department for approval → subject chief editor if different from head of department → newsroom copy editor who proof-reads, checks for factual, grammar and spelling mistakes, cut short or rewrite to get the right word counts, and works with design and layout people → newsroom manager on duty (either the chief newsroom editor or one of his deputies) for signature/approval →

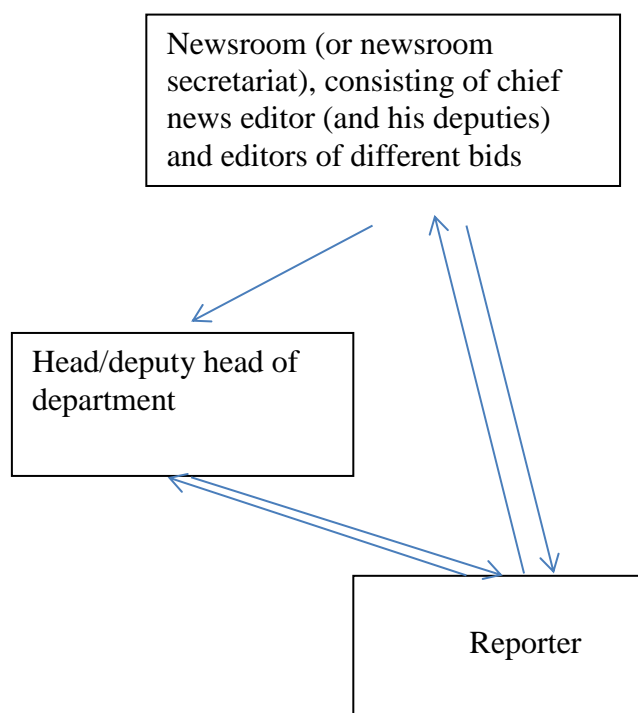
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<sup>124</sup> For the purpose of this discussion, where the story idea is from is not included. It is assumed that the reporter has discussed with and the idea is approved by his head of department and/or subject chief editor.

editorial board manager on duty (either the editor in chief or one of his content deputies or other members) for signature/approval.<sup>125</sup>

It is noted that the main content/story angles are already decided in the two meetings (morning and 2.30 afternoon) and, thus, the last two bosses basically are there just to make sure that there is nothing politically too sensitive. Therefore, the copy flow can be simplified as follows:

**Figure 15: Tuoi Tre's simplified copy flow**



Currently, at department level, reporters propose ideas to their boss, and then the boss proposes to the newsroom in the morning meeting, gets feedback and then feedback the reporters. Or in another scenario, the newsroom comes up with an assignment, briefs it to the head of department who in turn assigns it to one or more of his/her reporters. In the afternoon and especially the closer to the printing deadline, the newsroom usually works directly with reporters instead of having to

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<sup>125</sup> Some newspapers including Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong have another stage in the flow called “alerters” (proof-readers). These people are experienced, and most likely officially retired, journalists whose job is to read the copy carefully at night just before the pages are sent to the printing house in order to find both grammar, spelling, factual and, most importantly, political mistakes. However, as these people normally are not officially employees and do not interfere with decision whether or not to publish what, the stage is not included in this news/power flow.

go through the head of department (see figure above). Therefore, the role of the department and its boss is not really necessary except as a place to store expertise, ideas and written but unpublished articles on a specific field. Thus, the departments and their bosses could be made redundant smoothly if the newsroom's archive is in place and functioning, of course given that the newsroom has enough competent editors.

Similar to Tien Phong case, this flow means a lot of copy editing work is done by newsroom editors.

From the newsrooms' point of view, editors also claim that they are under constant pressure. They have to meet the publishing deadlines, meaning they have to get the whole newspaper published even when the reporters do not perform. They have too much to do: responding to the bosses, working on ideas with the reporters, copy editing (which takes most of their time), and even doing the reporters' job if the reporters do not submit on time. They complain about the workload and the fact that they are usually have to take the blames when things do not go well while as they only receive salary but no royalty as reporters do. Some editors even say they would rather work as a reporter as reporters can earn much more if they work hard enough and reporters do not have to report to many parties as editors do.

The middle management is usually the sector that is under most pressure and even criticism. The reporters often question the middle managers' capacity as editors and/or as bosses. When highest bosses have things to complain, it is the middle managers that take the blame, too. It is expected both by reporters and higher bosses that newsroom editors should be able to "coordinate" the news production with a focus on story idea developments and planning, as well as giving guidance to reporters and departments. However, as it is now, newsroom editors are doing too much of copy editing that they do not have time for strategic thinking.

### ***Systems (policies and procedures)***

There are quite a few conflicts of different kinds among journalists of different positions and different departments. People have different opinions about the

selection of news to highlight, how to publish or at all publish (interviewees 37, 39, 40, 49).

The disagreement about news values happens quite often even at Tuoi Tre, causing time and resource waste and, of course, frustration among journalists, especially more newly established departments/platforms such as TV and online (interviewees 37, 45). This is due to the fact that neither the news organisation has yet a clear set of news criteria, or a house's stylebook, that are built based on wide discussion and consent within the organisations and which every staff is informed of. Again, here we can see the clear need of communication or information being distributed across the newsrooms. Some interviewed TV and online journalists complain about the fact that there is no set of news criteria, leading to the current situation of "personal subjective judgement" of news and, disagreements among journalists. They believe it should be easy to fix by gathering journalists' opinions and deciding upon a common consent of a set of criteria, but no one cares about fixing it.

### ***Teamwork, cooperation and communication atmosphere could be improved***

Almost all the interviewees confirm that Tuoi Tre has a democratic working environment where everyone can raise their concerns (whether they do is another issue) and feel listened to.

On a more personal level, almost all the interviewees confirm that the relationship among reporters and between reporters and editors/bosses is very good and supportive at Tuoi Tre. This is even clearer within each other newsroom than the print daily. TTO, for instance, only has editors, then two online newsroom editors, then a deputy chief editor from the main newsroom, then a deputy editor in chief in charge of online. Therefore the connection between the editors and their bosses are quite close. If they have conflicts or disagreement with their direct bosses, they feel quite easy to directly contact the higher bosses to discuss the issue.

In the daily newsroom the lower-ranking editors and reporters have more conflicts or frustration with each other even though they all confirm that they find the overall working environment satisfactory.

Both reporters and editors at the daily newsroom say that they are too busy to think of offering support to other departments/newsroom, except for sharing ideas as mentioned above, unless the latter ask for help, mostly on a personal/individual basis as mentioned above. This agrees with the focus group discussion where some middle managers from other newsrooms (online, weekend, etc.) complain about the fact that they do have to trace after and beg the daily reporters to write/produce “for them” because they do not have their own reporters.

The common practice is that only when the Daily’s reporters and editors have articles/materials that cannot be used for the daily, they then give them to the Online or Weekend. The online staffs have been complaining about the fact that TTO seems like a “rubbish bin” as they mostly only receive what the daily does not want (interviewees 37). And most reporters prefer to publish on the daily print than online as royalty for print is higher than for online (interviewees 37, 39, 40, 49). This is, in my view, quite normal as they have to prioritise their efforts. However, it can be seen by everyone at Tuoi Tre that the practice is not healthy for Tuoi Tre as a whole as it makes the online newspaper much less competitive (as everyone tries to keep their articles for the print paper which usually comes much later and less frequently than the online). Fortunately Tuoi Tre is now quite aware of that fact and starting to change by providing some newsroom editors specifically in charge of the online paper with the hope to improve the interaction and cooperation between the online and the main (daily print) newsroom. They are also considering providing reporters to TTO to stop the fact that TTO has always had to “beg” content departments and reporters to write for them (interviewees 32, 43)<sup>126</sup>.

Also, until recently (half a year ago), the online department was even considered only the “informers” to the print daily. Online editors were supposed to do online research to find story ideas and asked to come to the print daily meetings to

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<sup>126</sup> As mentioned earlier, both TTO and Weekend do not have their own reporters. The direct bosses of these publications are officially deputy chiefs of the main newsroom and, thus, should have the power to direct/coordinate the reporters but they cannot as the reporters only report directly to their heads of departments and the heads of departments only report to the chief newsroom editor who is main responsibility is the daily print. Therefore, recently Tuoi Tre has decided that the chief newsroom editor should not only just focus on the daily print but also on other publications. He does have general directions to all the platforms and make final decision which platform should have what content and how but, still, according to habit, focuses more on the daily print, just like the content departments. This needs some time to change more profoundly.

inform the print departments. Now the online representative attend the morning meeting as a requester, i.e. a sort of customer who “places an order” of what they want to have on the online paper (interviewees 37, 39).

Another interesting thing is that, as TTO has a deputy editor in chief in charge, their voice is stronger in those meetings when the deputy editor in chief is present, even preferably when he is on duty. Otherwise, the other editors/bosses are, naturally, less accommodating (interviewees 37, 42, 44). Again, here one can see how the “personal” or “subjectivity” factor and relationship work in the organisation.

On the other hand, TVO’s editors also have things to complain about TTO! TVO has been trying to negotiate with the TTO’s highest boss about the presentation of TV items on TTO platform, but there is a difference in the boss’ and TVO’s view in that issue. TVO wants to have highlights/priorities or ranking of TV products, but the online bosses do not care. It is not a question of different news values here. It only shows the fact that the online people do not take TV items seriously enough (interviewees 37). Interestingly, the current relationship between TVO and TTO seems to resemble the relationship between TTO and the Print Daily until recently.

It can be included from the interviews that the cooperation both within and cross departments are good, but mostly on the same and lowest level, i.e. among individual journalists/reporters are take initiatives to work together and, especially in case of TV and online, learn new tricks. But the cooperation/communication in the later stages, i.e. articles going through editing and especially publishing stages, is much more problematic.

In short, the interviews and focus group discussions show the common understanding of the cooperation among departments and especially among all the platforms. Tuoi Tre’s managers and all the staffs also understand that they should acknowledge the importance of all the platforms, including the newer ones that have not yet brought wanted profits such as online/internet and mobile. However, the practice is far from what is wanted.

Most interviewed journalists claim that the communication in the organisation is not good enough and that there should be concrete ways to promote and improve



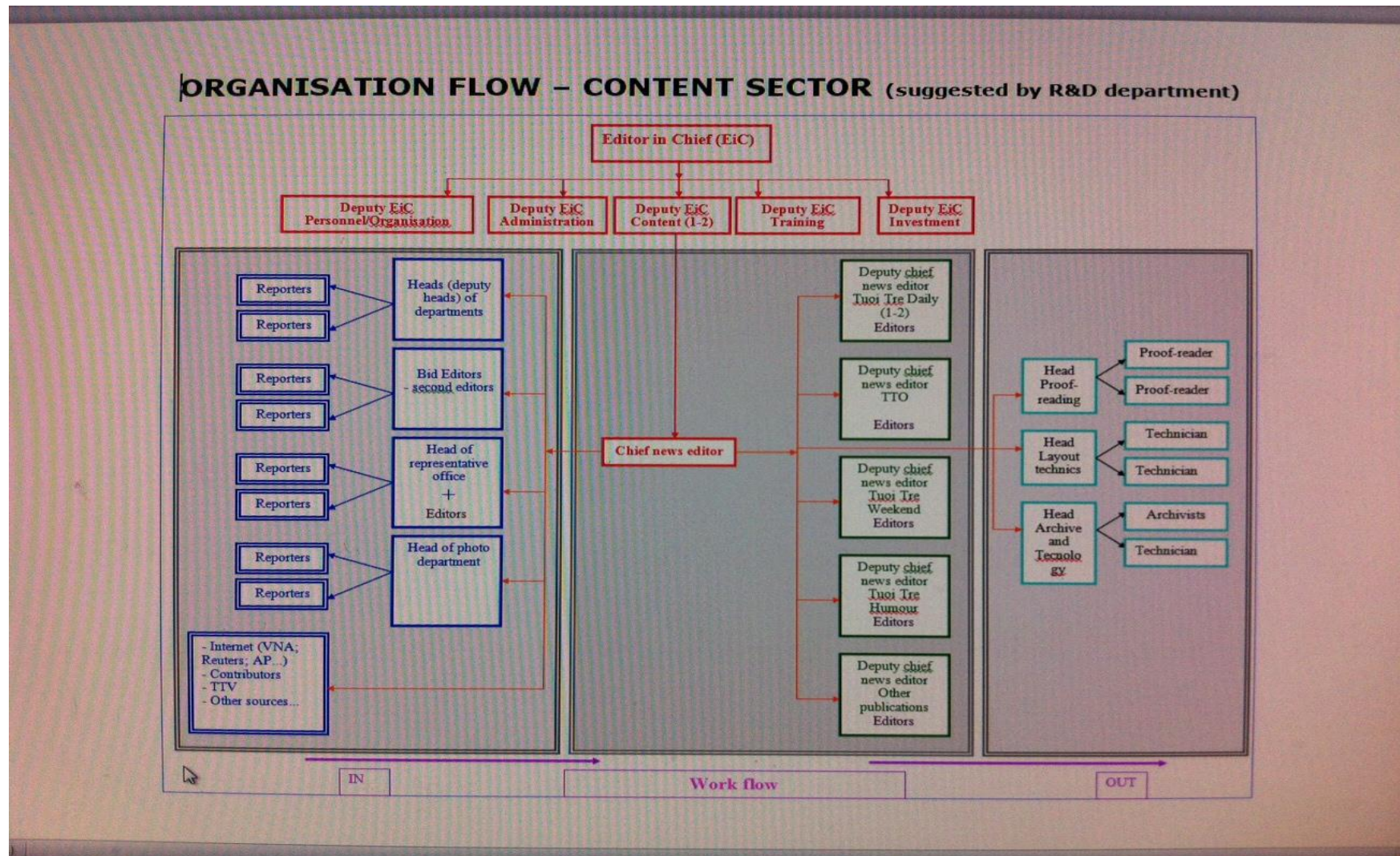
better communication among reporters, among editors and between reporters and editors which will surely facilitate cooperation/teamwork for a common good. They believe the news flow should be flatter and there should be one or two maestros working in shift to avoid overlapping which happens every now and then. It happens, though not often, that a few journalists from different departments come to the same new conferences, which, according to the reporters, is quite shameful as it shows the lack of professionalism in newsroom management and waste of time and resources (interviewees 36, 37, 42, 43, 44)

### **2.2.3 Strategies implementation and results**

#### ***Changing production flow***

The R&D and personnel departments as well as the newsroom chief editor's secretary have been asked to give suggestions on a new production flow that works better; as well as build a set of job descriptions, as well as a house regulatory guideline with a clear commendation and sanction policy. The guideline was being done at the time of my research and was expected to finish by the end of 2010. The following is the new production flow suggested by the R&D department:

Figure 16: Tuoi Tre New News Flow proposal



As we can see, the suggested work flow is a bit more flattened and straighter. The confusing terms “bid editors” and “heads of departments” are still there, but they apparently indicate the same function being the head editor of a field.

Realising the need of cooperation, as well as a clear understanding of different positions within the content production system to avoid inefficiency and frustration, the R&D department is also assigned to develop job descriptions (which have never been documented before). Interestingly, it is noted that all the job description proposals put an emphasis on improving communication, both horizontal, upward, downward and diagonal.

Maestro concept is also highlighted very much, showing the organisation’s, or at least the R&D department’s, commitment to and belief in the concept, and confirming the impact of the Swedish media development project on the organisation.

### ***Convergent newsroom - Cooperation across platforms and departments***

The focus group shows that Tuoi Tre’s aim is to become a strong corporation with the core business being multimedia. Therefore, Tuoi Tre recognises the importance of the online newspaper, as well as of investing in other “more modern” media namely web-TV, web-radio, and mobile even though as it is now the print daily still receives the highest priority as it is the cash cow to cover the costs incurred by the other media. The bosses highlight the need for the cooperation between all the platforms, especially as it is now, between the daily print and online newspapers. They believe the convergent room will eliminate the current competition among the different platforms which should not exist. They also believe that the “convergent newsroom” is the solution to all the inputs-outputs problems for all the platforms, but that needs the newsroom chief editor (general managing editor) to have a strong head, a good overview and clear strategies (interviewees 32 and focus group)<sup>127</sup>.

Therefore, Tuoi Tre has been trying to implement the model of convergent newsroom since around late 2007. However, whether it has been successful is another issue.

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<sup>127</sup> Before the Maestro was introduced to the organisation, the newsrooms were running independently.

At the time of my interviews in March 2010, the interviewees from the online newspaper say that the organisational structure/news flow is more or less the same. The weekend still has no reporter and is dependent on the Daily and contributors for their inputs.

For the last three years, the online department has been proposing to have their own news reporters so that can be proactive but there has been no change in this regard. They have neither been able to recruit people from outside nor bring reporters from other content departments as the latter are already short of staff.

However, there have been some changes in terms of personnel that are very positive to the online paper which has until recently always been considered by bosses and other staffs as “subordinate” to the print or a “trash bin” of the print, or just as another content department. Now they have two editors in charge in the newsroom, who had been working as print editors before meaning they understand the processes in both print and online newspapers. This helps improve direct communication and mutual understanding/cooperation between TTO and the print daily. Also, more importantly, they have managed to push forward a policy requiring a more active cooperation with the online newspaper from the print newsroom editors and heads of departments who are now supposed to provide/share their hottest breaking news to the online paper instead of waiting to publish the material on the print first. When there is a big event, the two departments’ (or in fact, they are like two separate newsrooms even if the chief news editor is still officially in charge of both) representatives now can sit and work together.

The online staffs believe this improvement is the result of both Tuoi Tre’s strategy to invest on the online newspaper as they believe that this platform is going to be leading in the future, and the training courses run by international trainers including the Swedish ones, mentioned above and in chapters II. However, the cooperation between the main daily print newsroom and TTO, as well as between TTO and TVO is far from the “ideal situation” that they would wish for due to the old mind-set of the high bosses. “This kind of mind-set, which only focuses on traditional text and still pictures, and which believes in “we are two separate departments, not a joined force”, will lead the “multi-media strategy” nowhere.” (interviewee 37)

As such, it seems to me, despite the fact that the highest leaders do talk about the importance of television as a business contribution to the future multimedia giant Tuoi Tre, and that they provide resources to it, TVO still is sort of an “adopted child” as very little guideline is given by the bosses to its developments, and other platforms and staffs hardly are interested in it. The TVO editor-interviewee confirms: “They (the bosses) are talking about the television’s role, but they have not put much effort into developing it here.”

As it can be seen from the interviews, despite the fact that everyone in Tuoi Tre is looking forward to a “convergent newsroom” and is still more or less optimist about it, the journalists see the difference between the strategies and the practices/reality. As it is now, the every morning meeting, which involves the chief news editor or his deputy in charge of the day and head of all the departments (or their representatives), sees discussions and decisions made quite separately for each medium with the focus and priorities given to the print paper (interviewees 37, 43, 44, 50). (However, the newsroom chief editor or his deputy on that day duty is the one who has the final decision which items should be published in which medium, or two, or more.)

Both TVO and TTO editors also complain about the fact that the current newsroom chief editor and his deputies have not proven their role as real maestros as they only decide “hey, you guys give your stories/news items to the online newspaper first” instead of going into details what angles, length of the items, what kind of graphics or pictures, which style etc. like the way they do more and more often with the main articles for the print daily (interviewees 37, 43, 44). On top of that, there is a problem from the reporters who still have the habit of prioritising the print daily as they believe that they should report directly to the newsroom which has always been focusing on the print daily. Thus, even though they have started to remember that they have obligation to provide their stories/items to the online newspaper, and most of the time they are willing to cooperate as well as they also get royalty for publishing online (though less than for print) they still are fixed to the habit of trying to finishing their print stories first, then mostly just forward the same articles to the online newspaper for publication. Therefore, the writing style is not really online reader friendly. And

Tuoi Tre online is, thus, cannot compete with other purely online newspapers such as VNExpress, Vietnamnet, etc. in terms of speed (interviewees 32, 37, 49).

So, the organisation has been struggling and after two or three years they have not been able to really work like a convergent newsroom.

One of the reasons for the above-mentioned situation is that the policy on cooperation among all the newsrooms in general and between the print and online in particular remains unwritten. There has been no official document regulating the cooperation mechanism, i.e. who should report to whom, who decides what, how should the cooperation be step by step, and what if someone refuses to cooperate, etc (interviewee 32).

Another, and probably the main, reason, according to some interviewed journalists, is due to the current confusing model while both heads of departments and subject chief editor exist, and there is not yet a capable maestro for each subject field. Most of the editors, and reporters as mentioned above, are print-oriented and, thus, their mind-set is not suitable for a multiplatform environment. These people will need to be trained and upgrade themselves for the purpose and that takes time (interviewee 37).

In short, so far, there is an umbrella strategy to become a convergent newsroom with subject maestros, but there is not yet a detailed roadmap or action plan to realise the idea.

### ***Improving cooperation and efficiency using Maestro concept***

When interviewed, the chief news editor and some members of the newsroom all emphasize that they believe in cooperation, or in other words, “newsroom convergence” where there is/are a maestro that unites and directs a multi-media orchestra to produce a common Tuoi Tre with different pieces of products that are attractive to the audience.

As mentioned before, Maestro concept was introduced by some Swedish journalists/trainers widely to Tuoi Tre in around late 2007 and immediately caught its staffs interest and consent thanks to its simple, easy-to-use characters and effectiveness.

The success of the application of Maestro concept was so clear that the journalists in Tuoi Tre were then persuaded to adopt it in their everyday work. Only occasionally some more- experienced reporters were hesitant or too lazy to discuss with his often younger editor(s) in the newsroom.

After the training, Tuoi Tre has been focusing much more on cooperation in order to produce multi-faced stories, especially in big news events.

*“Permanent” versus “ad hoc” maestros*

Naturally, the heads of content departments or heads of subjects have always been playing some sort of the role of “maestros” who assign, discuss and approve (initially) their reporters’ stories. This is nothing new. This works well on everyday normal situations, and the levels of “success” and “satisfaction” depend on the maestros’ tactics and attitude.

Before the training courses with the Swedish trainers, though, according to most interviewees, there was much less discussion and planning between editors and reporters before reporters went out to the field. And if there was any discussion, most heads of departments or subjects and newsroom people usually asked questions like: “What angle are you going to do?” or just gave instructions what angle(s) should be done, instead of going further in much more details how to do it. This means basically only the very first step of the Maestro concept was done (one-liner) before it was introduced to Tuoi Tre by the Swedish trainers around mid-2000s.

Since the concept was introduced, both editors and reporters have been much more aware of the importance of joined planning for stories although they do not really strictly follow the Maestro concept’s steps. They usually just decide the more or less general angle and then focus more on the “how to” step: who to interview, where to go, how long is the article, instead of spending more time on speculating the “readers’ questions” which are the centre of Buck Ryan’s Maestro concept<sup>128</sup>.

Actually, Maestro was introduced to Tuoi Tre by the Swedish trainers in a different version than the original by Buck Ryan. Instead of involving all the people in the production, the Swedish version only involves an editor and a

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<sup>128</sup> For more about the concept, see chapter III and VIII.

reporter. By applying this version, Tuoi Tre might have missed Maestro's other aims such as to make stories visually stronger (as no design/layout people involved), to have better pictures, graphics and layout, to serve as a tool for cross-newsroom learning, or improve commitment and make lines of responsibility clearer (as other people than the editor and reporter are not involved in Maestro sessions). Also, no pre-Maestro steps are done as suggested by the author.

Another observation is that Maestro concept was introduced to Tuoi Tre as a tool to use to all stories all the time, which is, according to the author, a common misconception of the concept. The funny thing is that in fact Tuoi Tre does use Maestro more in big news events, which corresponds to Ryan's suggestions that the concept should apply to only the best stories as "routine stories can be handled in routine ways." But many journalists including both reporters and editors believe that they should use it on daily basis!

*Ad hoc:*

Tuoi Tre's version of Maestro has been used more effectively in big and multi-faced news events when more than one journalist, often from more than one content departments/fields, are required in order to cover the events. In such cases, every interviewee agrees that Maestro concept is a wonderful work method as it facilitates smooth cooperation among different involved journalists for a common good. It would be impossible to have a series or a number of articles that are spontaneously connected to each other and examined from different angles of the same event or a group of linked events without a joined action plan and someone who "directs" or "coordinates" all the activities and players/journalists.

Almost all the interviewed journalists see Maestro concept a very useful/helpful tool of communication to improve the quality and save resources, but unfortunately, it has been used well only in some individual departments rather than at the whole organisation's level. There is a lack of a great Maestro that can co-ordinate the whole organization (multi-platform) in a satisfactory manner.

The middle managers taking part in the focus groups and some reporters interviewed believe that the newsroom chief editor and his deputies when they are on duty should be the "great maestros" and the other newsroom editors should be subject maestros. Then the editors should only work as the "news organisers" or



“maestros” with reporters instead of, as it is now, having to also edit copies meaning spending too much time on correcting grammar and spelling mistakes, cutting articles short, double check facts, etc. which makes it impossible for them to reflect and see the whole news picture and give appropriate instructions/advises/assignments to their reporters.

That would be ideal, but in order to have it successful, the editorial board should not at all involved in any stage of the production, and there should be no more editors in between the newsroom and the reporters, which both are impossible in the current situation at Tuoi Tre.

Still, it is worth noting that, despite the fact that Maestro concept could be used in a much more frequent and effective manner, it has shown a great success and proven to be a very helpful tool to improve newsroom efficiency.

Both editors and reporters have become more contented as thorough planning indeed reduces a lot of aftermath problems namely a waste of time and resources; and frustration for reporters (having written articles thrown away without getting paid) and for editors both at department level and in the newsroom(s) (being uncertain the whole day knowing little about the content, angles and length of the articles; having little to do during the day time but overload during the evening; sometimes even having to rewrite the whole articles or contacting other reporters/departments for substitutions in case the articles cannot be used).

### ***Organisational communication strategies***

It can be seen from the interviews that Tuoi Tre’s bosses are open to all the staff about the organisation’s current situation (including circulation and advertising increase or decrease, threats from competitors and political forces, etc.), the competitors, the factors that affect Tuoi Tre, and its strategies. The interviewees confirm that during big yearly meetings with the whole staff, the editor-in-chief presents Tuoi Tre’s visions and missions with details about the strategies that he believes Tuoi Tre should adopt in order to become a more powerful and successful multimedia corporation.

Of course, their policies, which are discussed above, are quite obvious considering the current political tension and current competition for the audience in the

industry (see chapter II). Most interviewed journalists believe the strategies are good as that is the only way to be politically safe but still attract readers.

One interviewee also says: “There is nothing “revolutionary” about our strategies as suggested by the bosses. It is already very good if we can keep our current readers, let alone talking about doing something else extraordinary to increase the readership or circulation. Therefore we just need to try to do all the basic things that journalists have to do, meaning writing from the readers’ perspective instead of doing whatever we want, closely update ourselves about the situation and constantly keep contact with our sources in an attempt to be the first when news breaks out, and of course be accurate and impartial when reporting. In short, we always try to be quicker and better, meaning more accurate, than our competitors.

As the strategies are obvious, it is probably one of the reasons why they have gained such a common consent among both bosses and staffs at Tuoi Tre. Still, it is worth noting that the strategies are communicated to and well-practiced all the staff of different levels in the organisation making them feel part of it and not missed out.

Most interviewed journalists are also aware of Tuoi Tre’s other money-making and image-building activities, though not in details. They claim they support the activities but do not care much as they focus more on the content production, which is quite normal in Vietnam according to my observation.

Tuoi Tre’s staffs are also informed of its decisions including new suggestions/rules on certain issues in the productions, commendation or sanction to a member of staff, etc. However, most of the information is communicated orally in big meetings. There is a lack of written communication throughout the whole organisation. This implies that there are surely people who miss the information. And over a certain period of time, the information might be forgotten, or interpreted or implemented in a different way than originally meant to be. Normally, it is ok as people just do their job according to their habits as long as nothing seriously wrong happens. But as soon as something happens, in a case of serious internal conflict/dispute for instance, Tuoi Tre might have difficulty dealing with it as it has no official written rules to refer to. In fact, as confirmed by the chief news editor, in terms of internal relations, the newsroom

has so far worked in a “contingency” mode, meaning when a situation arises that someone, usually newsroom people, see the need of a regulatory document, they just compose it and have it signed by a bigger boss (the editor in chief of one of his deputies in charge). This can be quite problematic as journalists do not know what to rely on or refer to in their everyday work which can be very frustrating, according to many interviewees.

Parallel with building the house’s set of rules, news values, styles, etc. Tuoi Tre has not been able to build an information or news archive that all the journalists can access despite the fact that all the journalists and managers interviewed believe that it is really needed, in order to avoid unnecessary waste of resources such as personnels and time; confusion and frustration among staffs; and readers’ dissatisfaction which are all caused by things like picture, news and in-depth articles missing or overlapping.

Another role of an archive is to store and sort the organisation’s in and out and internal documentations, and this will surely help with all the issues discussed above.

#### **2.2.4. Change management and the role of communication**

The previous sections have already included the discussion about the results of each strategy implementation. This section, therefore, will only briefly summarise and add the most striking results that Tuoi Tre has achieved.

The middle managers, meaning editors in the newsroom(s) and heads of departments claim that after the training courses with Swedish trainers, especially the management course, they have learnt to listen to each other and to their staffs/reporters; understand the reporters better and also reflect on and better understand what they themselves want from the reporters. They have also learnt different ways to work with different parties on big topics across different platforms. They have recognised the role of leadership in the newsrooms and their own departments. All these, according to them, will surely make the work flow smoother which in its turn will make work more efficient and satisfactory.

The amount of unused articles/materials (i.e. features that need more work. There are much more unused short news items depending on what happens every day) is very small, according to the newsroom’s people. Sometimes it happens that the

newsroom decides not to publish a written article, usually for political reasons. In that case, the author/reporter still gets royalty for the article. It also happens that one written article is not published because of its low quality, in which case the reporter of course does not get paid. However, this is quite rare as, according to the interviewees, i) generally speaking, Tuoi Tre's reporters are good enough not to write something terrible; ii) in most cases, topics/ideas are well discussed by the concerned reporter and their head or deputy head of department, as well as discussed with and approved by newsroom people and heads/deputy heads of other departments during the daily morning meeting.

The reporters interviewed also confirm this. They say usually each reporter has no more than one or two features written but unpublished per year. This is very different from Tien Phong's case (see chapter VI).

From the newsrooms' point of view, increasingly, when there are big news events, Tuoi Tre quickly mobilises "action groups" with a maestro, who then is delegated to "use" some reporters and editors from different departments. In these cases, the reporters directly report to the maestro instead of having to go through their departments as usual. The Maestro concept has been successfully implemented in such news events and, thus, is very much appreciated<sup>129</sup>.

### **2.2.5. Summary**

Tuoi Tre is implementing, or in fact trying to implement, the "convergent newsroom" model where the daily newsroom chief editor is the great "Maestro" or the boss of all the newsrooms (daily print, online, weekend, etc.) who decides which content goes to which platform, and who to involve in what news events, etc. The Maestro concept as a means to improve interaction and communication among journalists of different positions in the newsroom has been used more and more frequently and has proven very effective in their news production, especially in big news events that need more than one journalist to cover. Needless to say, the interconnection and cooperation has been improved a lot ever since. Especially the online and the print daily have seen great benefits and the "must" of interdependence.

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<sup>129</sup> Read more about maestros and Maestro concept below and in chapter III.

However, the complicated hierarchy in the organisation structure and the differences between the official administrative structure and the practical production process make the news flow confusing even for those who have been working there for many years and, thus, creates frustration for both reporters, editors and designers/outline people.

It can be seen that Tuoi Tre's staffs of different sectors (content, business, administrative) are generally kept informed of the common things namely the organisation's vision and general strategies, and what the general situation of the organisation is like. Staffs of one sector usually do not know in details about the work of those in the other sectors, but they generally are happy with the fact that they know about the overall situation of the organisation, including its publications' circulations, which are kept quite secretive in many other newspapers and especially at Tien Phong, and the direction that it is heading to. This is very important as it does not only ensure that the strategies are better implemented but also it certainly is one of the reasons why the journalists feel a part of a "family", i.e. informed, involved and appreciated, and, thus, are generally happier and more contented with Tuoi Tre's working environment.

Most journalists are also contented with the generally democratic atmosphere at Tuoi Tre where they can easily voice their concerns, and get heard and acted upon. They appreciate that their sharing ideas is welcomed and awarded. And they feel secure with their job and their incomes.

However, many interviewed journalists confirm that despite having a reputation of the most professional and attractive working environment in the media industry, and that individual journalists are generally nice and helpful to each other, the cooperation across departments, i.e. organisational co-operation, in Tuoi Tre is not as good as it should be, and the not-so-good co-operation is really effecting their motivation, enthusiasm and productivity. Therefore, there is a lot ahead to do and it is good that Tuoi Tre's journalists are fully aware of the role of communication as well as their weaknesses in this regard and are working hard to improve it.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

### 1. Vietnamese news media's strategies to cope with changing environment

Research on strategic management in general and media management in particular suggests that changes in business environment will lead to changes in management strategies (Kotter 1995; Sparks 1995; Albarran and Chan-Olmsted 1998; Goodwin 1998; Picard 1998; Doyle 2002; Tuchman 2002; Boczkowski 2004; Hollifield 2004; Kotter 2006; Deuze 2007; Kueng 2008, etc.)

Current economic crises, technological developments that lead to the emergence and boom of new media, and changing consumption behaviours, etc. have been affecting the media in many aspects, forcing them to undergo major structural changes. Horizontal, vertical and diagonal integration are attractive strategies to raise the barriers to market entry and leads to *concentration* of ownership and sources of advertising for the media and to gain economies of scope and scale (Hoskins, McFadyen et al. 1997; Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Doyle 2002).

Keung's (2008) shows a continual weakening of mass market model and an increasingly active role for consumers, or in other words the "demassification and emergence of the niche media". The author presents a chart of the evolution of media content, which is changing from mass to niche and to participatory/peer (or interactive) models (p.85-86).

The newspaper industry has experienced the most immense change. In order to cope, the newspaper industry has responded by cost-cutting and consolidation. The last few years have seen more and more big newspapers restructure themselves (WAN 2007). Newspapers's strategies have included cooperative arrangements, varying content and products formats to reach more audience, specializing content, changing presentation of news, providing more analysis in the efforts to differentiate themselves with the competitor television, change of protocol, running online versions; offer free commuter newspapers, building trusted relationship with their readers, market fragmentation, cost-cutting, etc. (Doyle 2002; Tuchman 2002; Aris and Bughin 2005); content upgrades, special supplement and magazines, promotional offers of books, CDs, DVDs, free subscription trials, improved home and newsstand distribution (Kueng 2008). Most

recently, convergent newsrooms are becoming the norms (WAN 2007; WAN 2008 read more in section 1.3.).

Similar situation is observed in Vietnam.

From a fully state-subsidized sector, the majority of the news media have now become self-sufficient, only with the exception of the local party newspapers and radio stations. Even for the party newspapers and radio-television stations, the subsidies are being cut down sharply. This, together with increased production costs, changing behaviour of audience and advertisers and increased competition from other media, has made the issue of quality and efficiency urgent.

Horizontal integration of content is a trend. Existing narrow subject newspapers establish other offline or online publications which cover general interest issues. On the contrary, more established general interest news outlets establish new publications or supplements that target fragmented groups of audience, while trying to develop the existing core product and keeping the content and tone line. Both Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong, which are serious general interest newspapers, have developed several products for different target groups.

Other media strategies, which also follow the international trends, include vertical integration (Tuoi Tre has a printing house and a distribution company, Lao Dong has a print house, etc.), diagonal integration (Both Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong and many others also go to other business like publishing, consulting, property for rent, etc. which brings up the conflict of interest issue); convergent/multi-platform or multimedia production, reformatting journalistic and entertainment materials to video and audio-format in order to sell to mobile and television services (Tuoi Tre, Phu Nu); developing partnership with other media to share content and profits from ads, focusing on only one genre (VNExpress – only fast, accurate and objective news, no commentaries), doing investigative journalism, changing layout, etc.

News organisations have realised the need to interact to their audience, which was not the case before when they were fully subsidised. They establish telephone hotlines for the audience to complain or inform about news events, invite them to share their stories or materials and pay royalty if the items get published (usually in a different place/page than the editorial items). Most print newspapers have

fixed section(s) and even page(s) for readers' letters, comments, opinions and discussions. With online newspapers or versions, almost every page, article or section allows the audience to interact with the newsroom and with each other through forums, voting programmes, and feedback areas.

A new wave of audience interaction and attraction is at the horizon as the online newspapers, which are owned and/or backed up by telecommunication/technology or computer and online game companies, are planning and working on providing online dating and online games integrated with content and/or as separate part of the existing online newspapers (Interviewee 57, 64). Another interactive programme that allows readers to "leave their trace in history" is also underway. However, the progressive online newspapers which are introducing these programmes still want to keep quiet about the details due to competition reasons.

Professionally, online newspapers have the technological advantage (it is easy to remove an item), so they are more daring in pushing control boundary. On the other hand, this also means that the online newspapers allow themselves to be a bit more floppy (interviewees 3, 7, 30, 102, etc).

Vietnamese print newspapers' content strategies include a switch from politically heavy topics at macro level to much more micro level, and lifestyle and human interest topics, everyday life stories, entertainment are in focus. The tones and language uses are also going to the same direction.

In terms of marketing, distribution and copy sales, unlike in some western countries such as Sweden where a lot of people subscribe to print newspapers, street distribution is a major form of distribution of all the newspapers in Vietnam except for the party ones. Newspaper sales, thus, are affected by the business practices of the street sellers who only react to an important factor - readers' unexpected behaviours or casual reading habits. According to many street news stalls' owners/sellers, the number of each newspaper's copies they buy/order everyday largely depends on the number of copies sold the day or days before.

Therefore, the popular big dailies such as Tuoi Tre, Phap Luat TP HCM, Thanh Nien, Nguoi Lao Dong provide the content outline of the next day issue for their main distributors/agents or the agents take initiative to contact the newsrooms to ask for the main articles' content outline so that they can decide the number of



copies they want to buy. The newsrooms, in their turn, inform their print houses about the total number of copies to be printed. As such, when there is something “hot” about a specific locality/town/region, the circulation for at least that day in that locality can increase sharply.

Another trend is that the big, popularly sold newspapers (namely Tuoi Tre, Phap luat TP HCM, Thanh Nien, Cong An TP HCM, Sai Gon Tiep Thi, Nguoi Lao Dong, Phu Nu TP HCM) which are those that sell more on street, now have their all distribution/sales done by more or less independent distribution companies usually called “agents” who are much quicker and more flexible than the National Post Office. Tuoi Tre has its own distribution company which serves its own needs and other companies. Tien Phong’s distribution and sales are not good and they are currently working to improve them.

Some newspapers with weaker brand names have to distribute their copies to stalls on a “returnable” basis, meaning the number of copies unsold can be returned to the newsrooms by the sellers.

The media’s advertising sales strategies include offering discounts on regular or long-time ads (interviewees 10, 14, 55, 32, 64). Some papers like Tuoi Tre offer discounts if the customers advertise on more than one platform, i.e. both in the daily and online.

Most advertisers in Vietnam choose popular media (big names, high circulations) or “peak time” on television or radio instead of really select the right media and the right time for their target customers.

This, together with the fact that media outlets do not have any research-based demographic statistics about their audience as well as do not have money to offer high commission, makes it very difficult for smaller newspapers to obtain ads. Therefore, the strategy employed by small newspapers or less popular magazines or journals, is to give high commissions to advertisers or middle-people who might use their personal relations to obtain ads/money from different companies, or who might share the commissions with the advertising staff in some companies who then are more willing to advertise on those specific publications.

Another common strategy among print publications is to announce fake circulation figures to attract advertisements (interviewees 1, 12, 29, 32, 53, 55).

Other popular strategies to increase circulation and improve the economy of the newspapers include having strategic partnerships promotion campaigns such as organising and/or sponsoring events, cooperating with other kinds of companies to give away different products such as CDs, DVDs, books, and even soap, shampoo, etc. to the papers' audience. This strategy is observed in the West too (see WAN 2007; Kueng 2008).

Another strategy common among newspapers is organising social activities: fund raising or charity events, sports or beauty contests, etc. These kinds of activities do not only bring social reputation and appreciation from the beneficiaries but also generate publicity about the organising newspapers and its partners/sponsors (interviewees 14, 32, 49). However, these have also brought up the question of conflict of interest (interviewees 10, 17).

Beside the strategies resembling international trends, Vietnamese news media have also developed "special" strategies to cope with ownership and political control.

As the law requires that there are no private media and private companies/persons are "in no circumstances allowed to interfere with content or publishing process" while still able to be part of other processes such as distribution or advertising (statement by the Deputy Minister of Information and Communication in charge of news media) (Minh 2007), the "name lending" strategy is employed. If someone or company wants to establish a news outlet, they only need to "borrow" an organisation which is politically qualified to be the name-owning organisation and also an individual who is politically qualified to be the editor-in-chief, and having the real work run by other (politically non-qualified) people. Or, in case a media house already has a qualified editor-in-chief and his deputies, it could just need a ministry or association to give their names as owning organisations.

Vietnam is now one of the very few communist countries left in the world. It has a dominating state, which stresses the core role of the Vietnamese Communist Party plus other official organisations and institutions. The media are supposed to be propaganda tools for the state, party and public organisations. There are several bodies that monitor the news media to make sure they do not "cross the border" meaning questioning the role of the state and party and their ideology, promoting

pluralism, revealing state and party's secrets, and even revealing corruption by politicians of high levels. The news media strategies involve practicing self-censorship, and publishing sensitive content just after the weekly media meeting led by the Party, meaning they will have a week before the next meeting for the issues to cool down and thus the sanction be less harsh. Pushing the boundary little by little has proven effective.

However, the news media do play an important role in the political life, though probably differently from the way the media do in the West.

The pressure from WTO negotiations and later official agreements, other international treaties and organisations, as well as the internal pressure from within the society, has made Vietnamese government and CPV be, at least officially, more determined to pursue administrative reform and fight corruption. The media are assigned to contribute to the anti-corruption cause (Tien and Tuan 2007) which is a difficult task taking into account the fact that Vietnamese media are asked to uncover corruption within a power system where they are a part of (McKinley 2009).

If there is a big case of corruption among high-level politicians or those "rich guys" that have mafia-like connection with them, the media usually play safe by sharing their materials with each other. The same situation applies when good investigative journalists at certain smaller newspapers discover potential big problems but do not want to take sole risk or, more often, are refused to be published by their own newspapers because of self-censorship (interviewees 17, 25, 29, 47, 48, 53). This can be considered a smart way to push the boundaries because certainly the pressure from the public resulted from coverage by many media is much bigger than otherwise, which does not only force the authorities to act but also reduce the risk of the media being cramped down.

From the individual journalists' perspective, it has become common for journalists to receive envelopes (with money inside) from different organisations or companies, e.g. in press conferences. Normally the money is nominal so the journalists do not feel bad about that.

Another trend among journalists is writing PR articles (disguised ads) and getting them published in their own and other media for much more money than the

royalty they get for ordinary articles. In response, the media houses pursue that editors need to check very carefully to avoid that. Many newspapers, on the other hand, have introduced PR-articles system where they charge companies if they want their PR articles to get published. This situation is quite chaotic.

At the operational/newsroom level, most strategies are to improve efficiency. This will be discussed below.

## **2. Newsroom efficiency management and role of communication**

At the operational level, the issue of **efficiency** is the journalists' biggest concern (Schlesinger 1987). Efficiency “serves the organisational need of getting work done on time” (Tuchman 1978: 78). The complaints are also about the poor personnel arrangement or manpower dispositions. “Any slips in the smoothness of a production would be talking points” (Schlesinger 1987:270).

Journalists from both Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre are also concerned about inefficiency at work. To them, efficiency means smooth work, time and resource saving while still maintaining good quality (interviewees 17, 19, 22, 32, 47), paper published on time (interviewees 15, 16, 26, 27, 32, 39), articles getting published (interviewees 17, 25, 29, 41, 51) and everyone happy and feeling good at work and earning enough to live and develop career (interviewees 20, 37, 44, 45, 50).

Media management literature suggests that media performance and productivity are influenced by different factors: organizational culture, organizational structure, individual cognition and learning, management and leadership, team composition/work style. (McQuail 1992; Cuilenburg 2000; Golding 2000; Lacy 2000; Picard 2000; Kueng 2007a; Kueng 2007b; Kueng 2008, etc.)

Organisational behavior suggests that organizational culture, leadership, management styles, motivation, work climate are important (Newstrom and Davis 1993; Schein 2004; Yukl 2006; Robbins and Judge 2008). Burke (2002) adds task requirements and individual skills/abilities as factors affecting organizational performance and change.

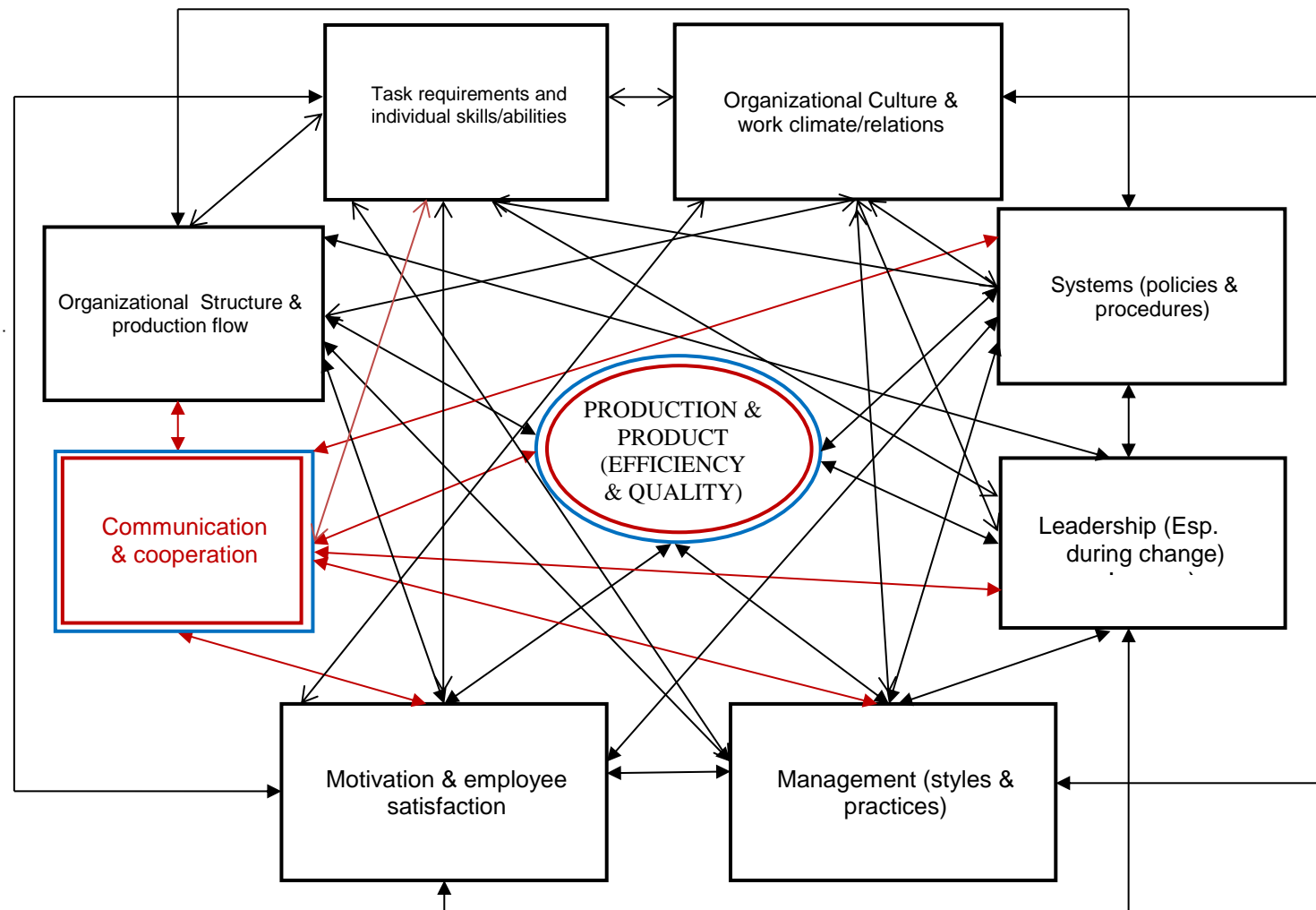
“Effective managing major change requires attention to change communication, organizational satisfaction and culture and upward communication” (Gray 2004). Poor internal communication has been identified as one of the single most destructive elements in an environment undergoing change (Bryan 1994; Holtham 1994; Kotter 1995; Nelson and Coxhead 1997). There is a strong link between internal communication and business performance (Gilbert and Sanchez 2005). Better communication creates better employee satisfaction which in turns leads to reduced staff turnover, customer satisfaction and, thus, higher profitability. (Hopton and Bain-and-Co. 1994; cited in Quirke 2008) Communication provides information, acts to control member behavior and fosters motivation (Robbins and Judge 2008).

Combining the theories, I suggest having the following model as framework to analyse the internal factors that affect newsroom efficiency and newsroom strategy/change implementation (Figure 2). The model helps answer the following research questions:

- What are the problems that hinder the newsroom efficiency at Tien Phong and Tuoi Tre?
- What are their strategies to correct the problems?
- What are the barriers to changes in the newsrooms?
- What is the role of “communication” in newsroom management?

## NEWSROOM EFFECTIVENESS

FIGURE 2: INTERNAL FACTORS AFFECTING NEWSROOM EFFICIENCY



The nature of these questions concerning newsroom efficiency demands a deep understanding of a real internal production setting including practices, processes and people and how these factors interact and affect each other. Therefore, ethnography is an obvious choice.

The above theoretical model was used to guide the ethnographic study fieldwork at two newspapers: Tuoi Tre, which is considered by most media policy makers and practitioners the biggest and most prestigious newspaper in terms of circulation, trustworthiness, working environment and conditions and Tien Phong, which is a typical middle-range newspaper. The model was also used to analyse the empirical data.

Both Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong are considered serious general-interest newspapers which are politically active meaning they are both interested in covering serious political, economic and social issues instead of focusing on entertainment or yellow journalism. Both have good professional journalists, whose skills and experience are respected by many journalists from other media houses.

Politically, they receive similar level of support from their respective owning organisations which are both politically oriented and they are both under the same level of political pressure. Both have new editors-in-chief around the time of this research (short after a hard time for the news media, a cramp, which led to the arrest and imprisonment of the two reporters from the biggest newspapers Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien, and the fact that some deputy editors-in-chief and chief news editors of other newspapers had their press cards withdrawn, as well as that Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien's editors-in-chief at the time had to leave office)<sup>130</sup>. However, Tien Phong's new editor-in-chief is a journalist who is active in the paper's production while Tuoi Tre's new boss and his deputies have no journalism background and, thus, do not interfere much with the production. This means there is in fact much less change that associates with the new boss at Tuoi Tre while it is totally opposite at Tien Phong.

In terms of economy, Tuoi Tre is much stronger. It offer high pays and good working environment and, thus, can draw good journalists from other media houses. Tuoi Tre is considered to have the strongest staff in Vietnamese news

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<sup>130</sup> Read more in the section about fighting corruption (pages123-128) and Appendix 1.

media industry. However, Tuoi Tre has also been suffering from brain drain as a lot of its experienced staffs/middle managers and reporters have left to be editors-in-chief or for other high status and high income positions in other media, especially the “market” ones as of more current years. As such, Tuoi Tre has been called “a good training camp” for journalists who want to prosper in the field.

Thanks to its strong economy, Tuoi Tre maintains a generous and close relationship with its content contributors and sources, especially the high-status/prestigious experts and good freelancers, which contributes to its success. Tien Phong and most other newspapers cannot afford that and, thus, have lost many good sources.

All these differences obviously mean the papers have different problems and, thus, different strategies. The following text summarises the research findings:

### ***Tien Phong***

The organisational climate is very stagnant and stressful as there are a lot of conflicts. Journalists are not content with salary and royalty and the way the newsroom and production is run. They feel frustrated and not appreciated. They complain about inefficiency and poor communication and cooperation. Their motivation is very low.

It is found that the reporters know very little about the newspapers’ development directions and economic situation. Poor communication and planning and even conflicts between steps of the existing news flow mean newsroom managers are too busy to develop a content strategy or manage the online and print content departments, which are really independent. This causes a lack of cooperation between these departments which, in turn, leads to missing stories or double reporting or even at times conflicting content across different pages. Communication problems and conflicts also result in reporters’ stories written but not published which is a waste of resources while newsroom editors still suffer from story supply shortage, distortions of stories, missing deadlines, design inconsistency etc. and poor quality (see chapter V for details).

The theoretical model shows how these problems are caused by the lack of strategy communication, the organizational structure (relationship between



newsroom and departments which is conflicting with the production flow), unclear job descriptions, different leadership and management styles of both the top and middle managers.

The model also shows:

1) how Tien Phong's managers have tried to change personnel; flatten the structure by letting the content departments take over the control of their content pages instead of going through another step being newsroom editors; change the news flow and production practices; built new policies and rule, etc. to correct the problems;

but also

2) how poor leadership and management styles and practices; wrong task/personnel appointments; lack of follow-up (sanctions or praises) have prevented better communication and improvement despite some initial successes. Organisational communicative factors account a lot for the failures.

### ***Tuoi Tre***

Most journalists interviewed say they are generally happy working at Tuoi Tre as it has a very friendly, democratic and professional working environment where they can raise their voice and freely discuss different issues with bosses and colleagues. They like and respect the leader (the chief news editor). They enjoy the status of an employee for a big and prestigious news house (interviewees 37, 42, 43, 46). They earn good income, enough not to have to write for competitors and they are treated fair (interviewees 38, 41, 114). They are also satisfied that they are kept informed of the organisation's situation and strategies. However, they believe there are still a lot to improve within each factor.

It is found that, interestingly, many journalists including reporters and editors believe the physical arrangement of the working place – content departments and bosses' closed-door rooms – prevents face-to-face interaction and, thus, does not facilitate cooperation which, in turn, affects the production efficiency. However, according to the management, it is very difficult to remove the walls due to the structure of the building.

The theoretical model shows that, similar to the case of Tien Phong, Tuoi Tre's even more hierarchical organisational structure and the difference between it and the real daily workflow create confusion, frustration and conflicts at different levels. Also, like Tien Phong's, Tuoi Tre's newsroom editors spend too much time on copy editing and have little quality time for strategic planning (However, the difference is that at Tuoi Tre's newsroom leaders do not have to do much of copy editing and the job is done by his staffs while at Tien Phong, the chief news editor want to proofread every item – this is not Tien Phong's policy but just personal decision and working styles, which, as discussed above, turns out to be ineffective) (see chapter V for details).

The journalists, especially the middle managers/editors are aware of the problem and have tried to change the structure and the news flow to correct this by trying newsroom convergence and transferring pages to departments but with limited success to communication efficiency due to culture, the old mindset of the involved journalists, especially high-level editors (see chapter V).

It is also found that unclear job description and additional positions (part of the hierarchy mentioned above) have also created confusion and frustration. The strategy is then to build policies and procedures, but the job has been going on for years and it is not certain when it will be done.

Even though Tuoi Tre's organisational culture and work climate are considered good and journalists generally are content, the leaders and managers still believe there is a need to improve communication and cooperation in order to improve efficiency. Maestro concept (see chapter II) has been employed as a tool for that purpose and it has helped organise convergence. Most journalists appreciate the tool and request the managers to use the tools on a day-to-day basis and at both newsroom and department levels.

### **3. Conclusion**

Despite their totally different situations in terms of economy, organisational culture and work climate, leadership and management styles and practices, the two newspapers share two problems: poor communication which leads to poor cooperation and both lead to misunderstanding, inefficiency and, thus, low

satisfaction and stagnant work climate; and hierarchical organisational structure that is conflicting with the production flow, which leads to poor communication, journalists' confusion, frustration and waste of resources.

Despite the fact that organizational structure is considered as a problem hindering efficiency by both organisations, it does not appear as the most important factor as the evidence is that Tuoi Tre has an even more hierarchical structure and confusing job description which do lead to journalists' frustration, the production still works smoother than at Tien Phong. In both cases, there are evidences that despite the organisational structure and personnel disagreement in the newsrooms which creates a lot of frustration among journalists of different positions across the organisations, most of the time journalists find their way to make work easier and more direct to some extent.

Communication's role, on the contrary, is evident in all processes. The case studies suggest that news media products are communication products - the news flow is almost the same as communication flow. Communication is the links in the chain and it directly affects the process and the product. Communication quality and frequency directly affect journalists' levels of work satisfaction and thus newsroom efficiency. It exists in, affects and is affected by the other factors such as culture, leadership and management, systems/policies and surely organizational structure as mentioned earlier.

The case studies show the impact of communication on strategy implementation in the levels of employee satisfaction. It can be seen that the two organisations are having very different communication practices that clearly affect their news production and their staffs' levels of work satisfaction.

As such, this study fully confirms communication literature (e.g. Burke 2002; Platen 2006) regarding the role of strategy communication but not only that, organisational communication has been proven by this study as extremely important as it affects and is affected by other factors. Tuoi Tre, and Tien Phong to a less extent, has shown that improved communication helps improve cooperation and efficiency and job satisfaction even when the organisational structure and work flow, which themselves affect communication, have not been improved.

Both Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong have shown that an organization is most likely to be able to fix its internal conflicts if there are common goals and common processes that everyone feels a part of. Strategy communication and organisational communication certainly facilitate this.

Therefore, communication management is a big, if not the biggest, part of newsroom management. Future newsroom research should reflect this.

Both newspapers' initial success in change process and also their regression show that organisational culture is an important factor, though it can change if there is a strong need to change by the employees and a consistent leadership and management style.

Tien Phong's chief news editor's failure (and in fact the newspaper's failure in terms of time and resources and culture) is a consequence of failure of the personnel strategy as the personnel's ability and skills do not meet the task requirements. This would have been of less effect if it was a reporter or manager of lower level, which in fact is very common in Vietnam in general and in both case studies in particular as the research data show<sup>131</sup>. This suggests that leadership plays even a bigger role, especially during change.

Future longitudinal ethnographic studies of the same organisation(s) will allow observation and evaluation of the changes in newsrooms through different leaders and/or leadership styles and, thus, will be of great benefit to understand what kind of leadership might work best at different stages of strategic change.

Another reflection on leadership and management and their impact on newswork and journalists' job satisfaction is that the two case studies show the limitations of the approaches to leadership recruitment/appointment in Vietnam:

- 1) appointing those who seem to have good management knowledge and skills but do not have good reputation as journalists. These are met with protest from reporters, especially those with long experience and are head-strong, as they do not respect the managers/leaders and, thus, do not follow orders.

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<sup>131</sup> Many journalists both in Tuoi Tre and Tien Phong, and other media houses, complain that many employees in their organisations should be made redundant as they are not effective (see appendix 1 for more details). Chapter V has also described in details that reporters from both organisations complain that the editors are not good for the job.

2) appointing those who have reputation and are respected by reporters but have poor editing and management skills. This can end up with the newspaper “losing a good reporter and gaining a bad editor” (interview 28) and, thus, bad business and personnel strategies which, in turn, lead to disasters to the newspaper’s existence and development.

3) The third option is to get an experienced editor from another good newspaper, which is the reason for brain drain in the best newspapers like Tuoi Tre and even Tien Phong.

This, in my view, is very evident in news production and differentiates the industry with other production industries where the leaders/managers’ technical knowledge and skills are not considered vital.

Employee satisfaction can be used as an important indicator in evaluating newsroom and communication efficiency. Both cases show that the results of the “external” strategies such as changes in circulation, readership, advertisements, etc. cannot be seen immediately. As usually more than one strategy or sub-strategy or action is employed at a time it is difficult to pinpoint what strategy bring what results. However, changes in employee reaction/satisfaction can be seen almost immediately. It was possible to see clearly the effect of strategy and communication on the journalists’ levels of satisfaction at work, as well as the levels of smooth completion of every day news production.

***Methodologically***, the newsroom efficiency model provides a framework to investigate internal newsroom problems that affect production efficiency and level of satisfaction of journalists. Practically, it could also be used as a framework by newsroom managers to identify problems, which factor(s) are causing them and to develop newsroom strategy and implementation to improve the situation.

It is found that all the internal factors that influence newsroom efficiency are closely related, especially communication which is found in every single process, problem or strategy. This makes the analysis and presentation of the data very difficult. The model, therefore, is of great help to arrange thoughts. However, there might be a risk of researcher getting “framed” within the model and fail to identify other possibly important factors.

The two case studies turn out to be very interesting and probably good as research samples to answer this study's specific questions. The papers are of the same type in terms of content and they share the political environment and level of political censorship<sup>132</sup>. This makes it easier to pinpoint the operational factors that influence the production efficiency. The fact that the two cases have different economic situation which clearly affect the staff's motivation and satisfaction is a factor that hinder the comparison. On the other hand, the fact that they are in different situation of change, i.e. Tuoi Tre's operational machine is stable while Tien Phong is changing revolutionarily, helps isolating the influencing factors to see which one(s) play(s) bigger role in change process.

However, more ethnographic studies into this issue in more media settings will surely help improve reliability and validity of this research.

This research shows the problems of uneven access which leads to difficulties in comparing and contrasting the case studies. This is a limitation of this research. In the future, if good and same access is obtainable, and with more samples, comparative research will be of great help to pinpoint the factors that affect newsroom efficiency and the levels of the effect.

It will also be interesting to have thorough ethnographic research on the whole organisation to understand the relationship of the newsroom and news production with the other aspects of a newspaper business.

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<sup>132</sup> Read more in the comparison of the two papers above, appendix 1 and the introduction sections about the newspapers in chapter V.

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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix 1: VIETNAM AND ITS NEWS MEDIA**

In order to understand the workings of the newspapers in Vietnam, and to provide a context for the case studies, it is necessary to describe the news media within the overall social, political and economic structure of the country.

Changes in the social, economic and political environment, as well as technologies, especially internet and mobile phone, lead to changes in all the areas of media production, distribution and consumption behaviours.

This appendix reviews the political and economic changes which have influenced government policies concerning news media coverage of “sensitive” issues such as the government or party political strategies or ideologies (especially in terms of socialism or communism-orientation.). The appendix highlights the importance of economic liberalisation and technological changes, as well as the increased role of media audience and advertisers in the transformation of Vietnam’s news media from serving as simply a mouthpiece or propaganda tool of the government in wartime to a means of providing the people with information, entertainment, and education. It broadly outlines how media institutions (denied state subsidies) have moved towards the status of being relatively independent institutions able to publish stories which can at best put a check on corruption and at least serve as a means for the different oppositional forces within the government and party to fight against each other for their own, not the nation’s, interests.

This text sets the context for the first research question of this thesis concerning the business and newsroom strategies Vietnamese newspapers are employing to cope with the changes in the media environment which are discussed in chapter IV. It also helps explain why certain things happen the way they do in the newsrooms as described in chapters V and VI, providing an answer to the third research question of the thesis about the role of communication in newsrooms’ strategy implementation. It also draws attention to the role of foreign-aided programmes in training journalists and this theme will be important in the next chapters.

This text is based on formal and informal interviews with media policy makers, editors in chief, editors and reporters from more than 20 news organisations, a

literature review of Vietnam and Vietnamese media since the War with America finished in 1975, and my own observation and reflection from the 15-year experience in the industry in different positions and from different perspectives. The questions asked are based on indicators/frameworks gained from reviewing the literature of newsroom sociology, journalistic production, news values, media management, organisational behaviours, leadership, etc. as discussed in chapter II.

## **1. Economic, political, social and ideological background and human factors**

### ***1.1. General demographics<sup>133</sup>***

Currently, the population of Vietnam is around 87 million, and the urban-rural ratio is 30-70%. Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups. Kinh or Viet is the main group with 85% of the population. The rest are ethnic minorities who mostly live in mountainous areas. Vietnamese culture is a mix of the 54 ethnic groups' and also heavily influenced by Chinese and South East Asian cultures. The main spoken and the only written language is Vietnamese (Kinh) which uses Latin characters. There are other spoken languages of the ethnic minorities, but many of them are dying out. The government is trying to protect the minority languages by providing radio and television programmes in these languages. However, no research has been found about the effectiveness of the programmes.

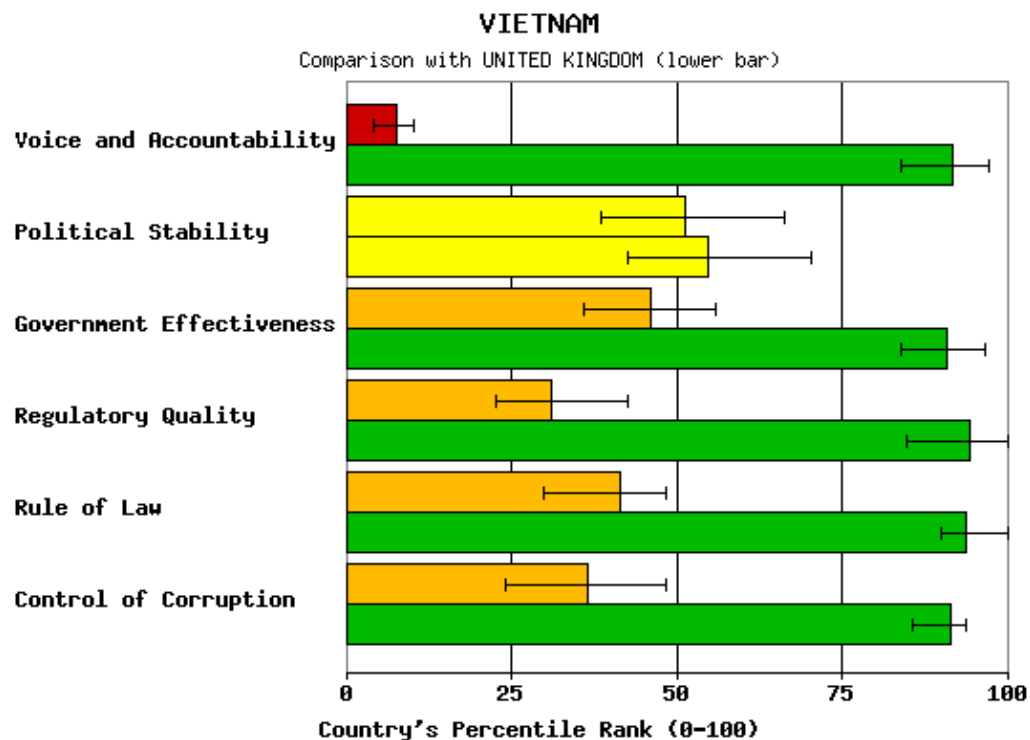
There are many religions in Vietnam but the majority of the population can be considered non-religious. However, most people worship ancestors.

Vietnam is a socialist country with a single ruling political party named Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) since 1945 in the north and 1975 across the whole country. The following figure 3 (Kaufmann, Kraay et al. 2010) provides some indicators of Vietnamese governance (in comparison with the UK as an illustration) and says something about the overall environment in Vietnam in general and media environment in particular. It is noted, though, the data may or may not reflect a complete picture and how people interpret the picture.

### ***Figure 3: Vietnam governance indicators in comparison with the United Kingdom***

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<sup>133</sup> For more information about Vietnam, see the government's website [http://www.chinhphu.vn/cttdtcp/en/about\\_vietnam04.html](http://www.chinhphu.vn/cttdtcp/en/about_vietnam04.html)



Source: Kaufmann D., A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi (2010), The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues

Note: The governance indicators presented here aggregate the views on the quality of governance provided by a large number of enterprise, citizen and expert survey respondents in industrial and developing countries. These data are gathered from a number of survey institutes, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations. The WGI do not reflect the official views of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. The WGI are not used by the World Bank Group to allocate resources.

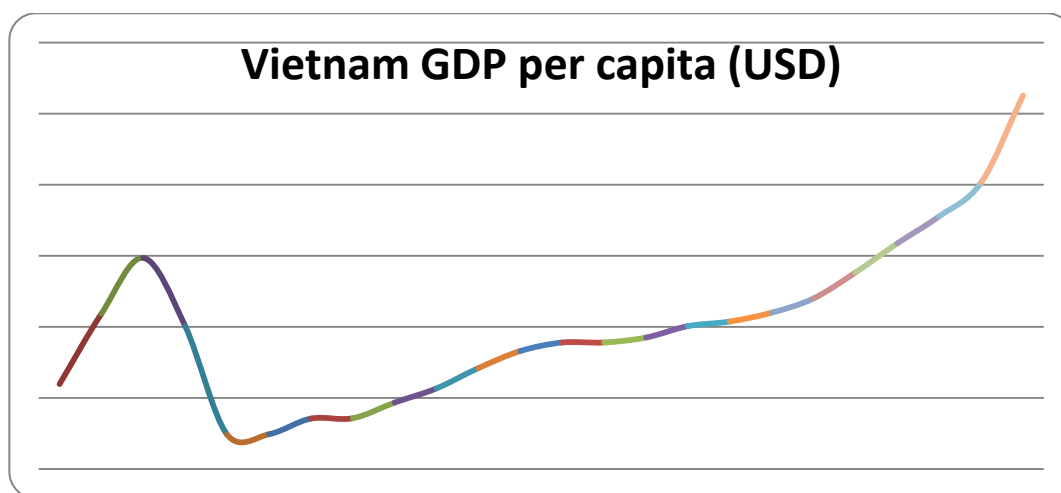
### ***1.2. Economic, technological and social factors***

Vietnam is a relatively small country in South East Asia, approximately the size of the British Isles combined. Because of its rich natural resources and a good geographical position in the region with a long coastline, Vietnam was a place of interest to many empires. As a result, Vietnam's history is one of continuous wars. The last big imperial war, allegedly led by the Americans against communism in Asia, ended in April 1975, leaving Vietnam in ruins and poverty.

Vietnam enjoyed great economic environment changes during *Doi Moi* (*Renovation*), starting in 1986, but shortly after that the economy dropped and despite constant growth ever since the economy didn't recover to the same level again until recently.

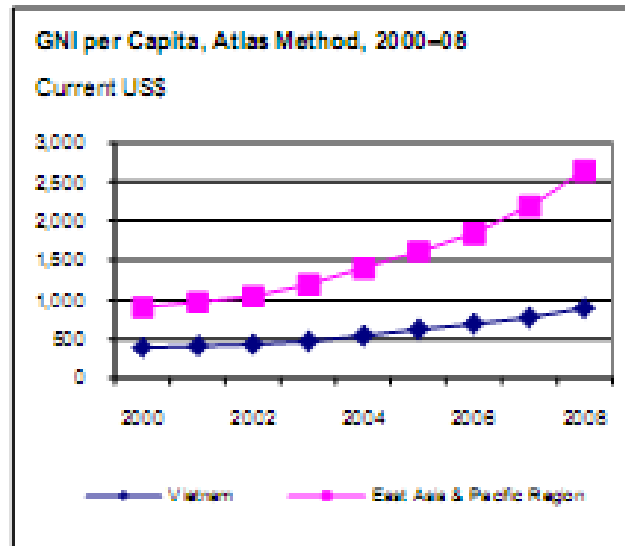
From around 2000, in line with proceeding to join and joining the WTO, Vietnam has enjoyed a relatively high economic growth rate (over 7% per year) but still

remains a poor country. Vietnam's GDP per capita was US\$98 in 1990, \$402 in 2000 and \$1,051 in 2008 (compared to the UK with \$17,700 in 1990 and \$43,540 in 2008) (WorldBank 2010) ( rounded numbers, see Figure 4). In the period 2010-2014 it is \$1911.



**Figure 4: Vietnam GDP per capita (USD) (Source: World Bank 2010)**

The relatively high growth rate makes a lot of Vietnamese optimists happy. However, many economists warn about the obvious ‘left behind status’ because “it would still take decades for Vietnam to be as rich as the rich countries if they... stood still where they are now”. And, because the richer countries do not stand still, “The Vietnam economy will be further and further left behind” (Ngoc 2010). Figure 5 might illustrate this.



**Figure 5: GNI of Vietnam compared with East Asia n Pacific region (Source: World Bank 2010)**

Ngoc (2010), whose article is agreed with by many other analysts, believes that despite the constant growth over 30 years, Vietnamese economic growth is not sustainable because of “poor growth quality, many social upsets, and very limited environment protection”. Another reason is the economic growth is mainly due to increased capital/investment and labour force, instead of increased productivity, cost effectiveness and technology-based labour productivity. The latter could also be seen in the media as the case studies confirm.

According to Ngoc (2010), some other characteristics of Vietnam’s economy include:

- Open-market policy aiming at increased export but in reality creating a huge import deficit over a long time period;
- Slow-speed legal and administrative changes; bad business environment;
- Heavy processing rather than producing, which reduces value-adding, increases dependence on foreign markets and, thus, increases own vulnerability and import deficit;
- Big gap between urban and rural areas;
- High interest rates;

- Very high inflation due to national overspending;
- Bad management and inefficient investment in sciences and technologies, as well as education and training which undermine the sustainability and quality of the economic growth.

This view is shared by Australian researcher Thayer who says Vietnam's development speed is slowed down by corruption, the lack of transparency, the one-party system and the lack of cross-check mechanisms (BBC 2009).

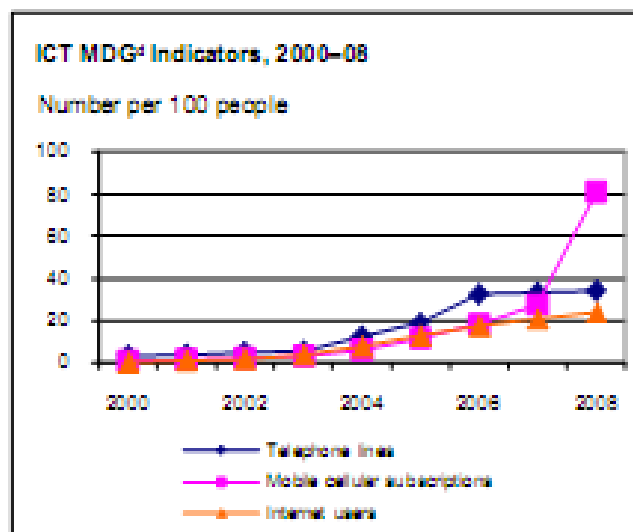
However, the quality of people's economic life has been improved significantly since the war (State 2010; n.a. 2011).<sup>134</sup> This has led to rather quick changes in the society and consumption behaviours. The old Confucian 'traditional' way of thinking is gradually fading away (see below). People are thinking more about their privacy and individual needs. Although it is still a very hierarchical society, the hierarchy is getting flatter, starting in private business sector where more and more young talented people become successful and, thus, taking over the hierarchy though not without pain, from the older generations. This slowly leads to changes in other sectors (see Huynh and Morch 2008).

In family and society at large, the younger generations tend to have less fear of fighting against the will of the older ones, resulting in changes such as: less and less 3-4 generation households; more and more households having house helpers; more women entering high education, going to work and becoming financially independent; more divorces and second marriages. Gender equality has made a great leap forward with a much higher percentage of females in parliament and social organisations, improved family and work balance and participation in decision making. Unfortunately, these developments are only strongly evident in urban with very little improvements in rural areas (ArdreyIV, Pecotich et al. 2006; Dao 2008; Huynh and Morch 2008; VietnamWomen'sUnion 2010; VietnamWomen'sUnion 2011). Interestingly, the changes are very much present in the media field, but in very different ways across the country.

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<sup>134</sup> I myself have been experiencing the change. I clearly remember being a small child queuing for hours to buy green-turning-yellow vegetables and half-moldy rice or to exchange tickets for small pieces of fatty meat. Compared to today's situation, especially in big cities, it was like in a folk tale.

In terms of technology usage, Vietnam is catching up quite well with the world's development. Vietnam had only 100 internet users in 1996 but in 2008 the number was almost 21 million. In 2009 the number had increased to 23 million users, ranking it 7<sup>th</sup> in Asia and in the world top 20, increasing to 24.3 million as of the early second half of 2010.<sup>135</sup>



**Figure 6: ICT usage Vietnam (Source: World Bank 2010)**

As of January 2010, the total number of telephone subscribers was 135.3 million, of which 115.7 million were mobile phones. In January alone 4.3 million new customers subscribed to mobile phones. (Chung 2010). Additionally, there was recently a sharp increase in the number of people using mobile phone to access news and entertainment information, with more and more media houses willing to develop their new partnerships to sell news to mobile phone users. Again, the gap between rural and urban areas is huge.

### **1.3. Ideology and Politics**

Vietnam obtained its independence in 1975 and became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976 after a long history of wars. It is now one of the very few communist countries left after the fall of the Communist Bloc in Europe. In 35

<sup>135</sup> Source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/>

years, especially since *Doi Moi*<sup>136</sup> in 1986, Vietnam has made a lot of achievements in all aspects. However, it is argued that the focus of Vietnam's *Doi Moi* has been to press ahead with economic reform but advance more cautiously on the political front. Still, researchers see the Vietnam political system, state structure and media-government relation as changed almost beyond recognition since the beginning of the reform process starting in 1986 (Fforde and Goldstone 1995; McCargo 2004).

As a result of many invasion wars by China and more than 1000 years under China's domination, imperial Vietnam has been traditionally heavily influenced by orthodox Confucianism, which basically promoted hierarchy and served as guideline to protect the governing people/authorities or leaders, either in a family, an organisation, or at the national level (Tran 1996a; Tran 1996b ).

Confucianism, in its turn, was reinforced by the authoritarianism of a monarchical form of government<sup>137</sup>. Therefore, it can be anticipated that there would be limitations to freedom of thought, whether it was freedom of expression or of religion (Ta 1988: 146; also Duiker 1995). Among some commentators, confucianism is also believed to have negative impact on economic growth (see Tran 1986).

Vietnam has a dominating state, which stresses the core role of the Vietnamese Communist Party plus other official organisations and institutions, suggesting that other groups and societal activities have little or no influence in the political system (Kerkvliet 2001a; Kerkvliet 2001b).

Therefore, more than 90% of the National Assembly delegates are members of the party (State 2010). The heads of Government, all the ministries, and judicial institutions are long-time party members and are nominated by the CPV Central Committee or Politburo, which includes the top leaders of the Central Committee. To have a full circle, the Politburo members are also the most powerful in the

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<sup>136</sup> *Doi Moi* (Đổi Mới) means Innovation or Reform.

<sup>137</sup> For a very succinct and interesting discussion of Vietnamese and Chinese Confucianism, "Some Opinions about Confucianism and Confucianism Research" in Tran, D. H. (1996). *May y kien ban ve van de nghien cuu Nho giao. Den hien dai tu truyen thong*, [http://triethoc.edu.vn/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=91:my-y-kin-ban-v-vn-nghien-cu-nho-giao&catid=5:t-ng-vit-nam&Itemid=9](http://triethoc.edu.vn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=91:my-y-kin-ban-v-vn-nghien-cu-nho-giao&catid=5:t-ng-vit-nam&Itemid=9) or <http://www.khoavanhoc-ngonngu.edu.vn>

This article succinctly describes Confucianism and its interpretations which have been influencing Vietnamese society. Also see other authors cited in the next pages.



government such as President, Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister in charge, President/Chairman of National Assembly, Minister of Defence, and Minister of Public Security. However, heads of judicial institutions such as Supreme People's Procuratorate and High Court are not members of the Politburo.<sup>138</sup>

Likewise, almost all the CPV Central Committee members are high state officials. The ministries or organisations whose leaders are not members of the Central Committee usually are considered to have less power. This seems to me quite clear in some recent cases; for example the leaders of Vietnam News Agency (VNA) haven't had places in the Committee for the last decade and, thus, VNA is seen as much less powerful in the news media industry. The same situation is observed in Ministry of Information and Communication which is the news media authority supposed to govern all the news media. However, the heads of some media organisations such as Vietnam Television or Nhan Dan, the biggest Party newspaper, are members of CPV Central Committee and the editor-in-chief of Nhan Dan is even a member of Politburo. This creates dilemmas for the Ministry's governance.

Vietnam's National Party Congress is held once every five years, usually around one year before the National Assembly Election<sup>139</sup>. The last Congress, however, was in January 2011 while the Election was in late May 2011. It is observed by most Vietnamese intellectuals (reference) that the five-year party congress circle has a great impact on the social, economic and especially political life of the country including the results of the National Assembly Member Election. About one or one and a half years before the Congress, when the Party discusses personnel issues, little policy development is carried out, because it is believed that no one dares to do anything that might upset the others. More recently, though, because of Vietnam joining the WTO, many decisions have been made according to WTO agreements, meaning the role of the state or the party congress is a bit less sensitive regarding those decisions. Still, as it is now, policy making has been very slow for about two years, especially in the fields where Vietnam has made no or little agreement during WTO negotiations. For example,

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<sup>138</sup> see Vietnamese government documentation at <http://www.chinhphu.vn/cttdtcp/en/member.html>.

<sup>139</sup> see note 4

discussions of the bill about new media governance have been delayed since 2008.

The media play an important role in the 5-year Party Congress circle, to be discussed later in the part 2 about the news media. The fighting at local levels is usually a bit earlier than at central level as discussed here.

Most of the time the VCP has been led by the same generation of revolutionaries who founded the party. Nong Duc Manh, who became the chairman of National Assembly in 1992 has been the General Secretary of the party since 2001, and is the first leader who did not have direct war experience. Since the early 2000s there are more and more VCP (and the government)'s leaders who did not have direct war experience (see their profiles on the government and party's websites<sup>140</sup>)

Thayer (VOA 2005), a prominent Australian researcher specialising in Vietnam issues, said in Vietnam the General Secretary is often someone neutral, i.e. acts as a middle man between two major political forces within the party<sup>141</sup>. This appears to be true in case of Mr Nong Duc Manh, who retired and was replaced by the current Chairman of National Assembly Nguyen Phu Trong<sup>142</sup> after the Party Congress XI in January 2011. However, the fact is, the four most powerful positions, State President, Prime Minister, President of National Assembly, Party General Secretary, are generally divided into two major sides/forces. And this could be any 2-2, 1-2-1, 2-1-1 or 1-1-2 (with the middle number being more "neutral"), depending on the "real political power" acquired by each person/position or alliance at the time. As the news media are often used as a political tool, the real political power/forces and power balance discussed here play a big role in the media life.

Thayer (BBC 2009) also said the Vietnamese approach to successor leaders is different to that in other countries, even China. In Vietnam, a person without

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<sup>140</sup> <http://www.chinhphu.vn/ctdtcp/en/member.html>, and <http://www.cpv.org.vn/cpv/>

<sup>141</sup> There usually are two main "sides" within the party, a similar situation to two main parties/blocks systems in Europe. The sides do not necessarily reflect very different viewpoints on important issues. It, I believe, simply is a way of dividing power to have a relative political balance.

<sup>142</sup> whose status of Chairman of National Assembly will be decided by the National Assembly Summit and Election in late May 2011.

experience in the highest rank of an organisation would not be allowed to be in the highest position of the organisation.

No official regulations about this have been found. However, it is the norm/unwritten law in Vietnam (see Khanh 2007), i.e. in order to be the general manager of a company, one needs to have been a deputy general manager; or in order to be the head of a department, one should have been a deputy head for a while. In other words, generally one should not be allowed to skip any rank/level in a hierarchy.

Nowadays, it is observed that, in businesses there is much more flexibility in the elite renewal or appointing processes (Phuong 2004). In state-run organisations it is also getting more and more flexible with renewal or appointing processes applied to low and middle management positions, but not the highest rank (Khanh 2007)<sup>143</sup>. The only exception is when the state-run organisation appoints someone from outside who has already had an equivalent position (not necessarily relevant) in another/other organisation(s). This is especially true in case of politically sensitive organisations such as the news media, where the appointments of top leader(s) need to be approved by higher authorities (D.Tr and D.B 2007; also BBC 2009 b).

This means that no middle-rank party member (such as secretary of a city or province, however good he is, if he has not been a member of the Politburo or Party Central Committee) would be appointed or elected General Secretary. Thayer (BBC 2009) believes that with this approach, Vietnam delays up to ten years' promotion of a flexible and effective local leader.

On the other hand, recently, there is an unwritten law about the number of terms that one could stay in their position and a written law that one has to retire when

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<sup>143</sup> More and more local governments are officially encouraging leaders recruitment through tests instead of promoting people from within the organisations, for instance Da Nang, Can Tho, etc. Da Nang (the third biggest city in Vietnam) was probably the first city/province to start this idea in reality, according to Dr Le Huy Thong, Director of Human Resources Science Institute under Vietnam Communist Party Central Committee's Commission of Human Resources. Dr Thong believes that this idea is generally good but difficult to implement as the governments of all levels and all industries are not prepared mentally. Dr Thong also claims that this new concept should be tested at commune level first and that "in principle, it is possible to extend the" leaders recruitment through tests" to higher levels in the governmental offices, such as manager or deputy managers of city/province level (see Khanh, H. (2007). "Thi tuyen lanh dao, chay chuc het dat ton tai". VNExpress: online at <http://vnexpress.net/gl/xa-hoi/2007/01/3b9f2b70/> accessed 19.5.2011.) This suggests that central government level is obviously excluded from such a policy.

they reach 60 for men and 55 for women except under special circumstances, which, again, usually include the central government/party leaders who might be able to be promoted when they are under 65 and/or continue to serve their whole term after the national official pension ages (BBC 2008).

Beside the age issue, regionalism plays quite a role in Vietnamese politics. Up to the Party Congress X in 2006, the majority of the highest leaders in the government and party were from the North. The tenth Congress saw ‘the rise’ of the southern people (see the leaders' profiles and the government and party websites noted above), which led to the hope for more progressive economic development and more ‘relaxed ideologies’<sup>144</sup>.

About 20-25 years ago backwards, one would be considered ‘against the government’, ‘against the party’ and would be in trouble if caught singing sad songs written by ‘enemies’ or having a bad comment about a party or state leader. Self-censorship, therefore, was very strong. People of my age, born in the 60s or 70s, still clearly remember being told by our parents to seal our mouth if we dared to give a would-be-considered-insulting remark to a party leader even of commune level.

However, it is observed that this is no longer the case. People, including politicians, can say whatever they want to, as long as it was not published written in a way that could be understood as “provoking the public to fight against the Government of Socialist Republic of Vietnam”, which is against the Press Law (1990).

#### ***1.4. Culture and Values***

This section reviews changes in culture and values in Vietnam and the next section attempts to see how far these are also in the media, media practitioners as well as media production.

Vietnamese people, especially sociologists, culture researchers and middle and late-career journalists, like discussing ‘Vietnamese characters’ and trying to

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<sup>144</sup> It is believed that the south, which has been influenced by the Americans and is further away from the political centre in Hanoi, is more liberal, especially in terms of economic policies, than the north. This is also considered affecting the media styles to be discussed later.

understand or explain why we acquire them. During my fieldwork I also attended some journalists' informal debates and found the stereotypes they made very interesting.

First, it is argued that, as a result of constant wars where people were killed or suppressed; and cities, walls, construction sites were destroyed, many times just after they had been built; Vietnamese people including leaders have developed excellent surviving skills including fighting and/or 'ducking' tactics. They also had to build and rebuild constructions, houses, etc., but never built, or could not build, anything big because the next day it might have been destroyed by the enemies, often much bigger and stronger such as the Chinese and Mongolian. Over the thousands of years, the survival skills have become deep-rooted leaving no space for development skills to grow. This is, to me, quite interesting and reasonable. However, as I traced discourse about Confucianism, it seems the fact that people practising survival better than development skills can also be attributed to Confucianism which "helped emperors keep their walls/fortresses and/or their thrones, but it did not help them to develop or reform" (Tran 1996). For more discussion on Confucianism and its influence in Vietnam, see Nguyen (2007), Mai (2001), Tran (2006b ), etc. <sup>145</sup>

Another explanation for the domination of survival ability over the development one is Vietnam's geographical conditions and agricultural culture<sup>146</sup>.

The implication is, unfortunately, until today people tend to remain short-sighted with short-term goals and a lack of vision and strategic plans. Interestingly, this is confirmed in some research studies into Vietnamese media projects

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<sup>145</sup> Needless to emphasize that, though, this thesis does not intend to criticise Confucianism which is believed by the above researchers to be "not pure" but "changing from time to time". This thesis only mentions Confucianism when I think it is relevant to discuss Vietnamese people's general characters which might help explain some of the behaviours journalists practice in their newsrooms, which might seem incomprehensible to Westerners. Also, it is emphasized that the characters discussed here, which might sound negative, are not exclusive to Vietnamese people who i) are very different from one person to another; ii) acquire many positive qualities that are not mentioned here for the purpose of this research.

<sup>146</sup> see article "Về vấn đề tìm bản sắc văn hóa dân tộc" ("About the issue of looking for national cultural identity"), in Tran, H. D. (1996). Đến hiện đại từ truyền thống (To modernity from traditions). Hanoi, NXB Văn Hóa.

(AustralianAgencyforInternationalDevelopment 2009). On top of the short-sightedness and lack of long-term plans is corruption. A longer-term plan is usually overturned by the planner's successors because otherwise the latter would not have opportunities to receive commission, most of the time huge. This phenomenon is very known by every member in Vietnamese society but, sadly, it is difficult to charge the culprits because the reasons to overturn the plan can be vague and undisputable such as "unsuitable" or "not enough money". There have been a lot of enterprises complaining about signed contracts not implemented because new bosses come into power unless the enterprises pay another commission. The result, again, is short-term contracts, bad quality services due to heavy commission duty, and of course frustration.

Vietnam's agricultural culture has allegedly led to what has become called a 'village-like culture' (Tran 1996) and 'collectivism' or 'calculated swarmism' – there should not be any place for individualism. It is considered safer not to make an individual (big) decision because then you will not be able to blame anyone else but everyone else will blame you if things go wrong. As a result, it was, and still often is, difficult to charge individuals, even leaders, for an organisation's failures. In Vietnam the saying "no child cries when a joint father dies" very well describes this situation – if it is 'our' project; it should be 'our', not 'my' responsibility, meaning it is 'no one's responsibility'. However, when it comes to close private interests, many people could well make use of their survival skills, meaning work very hard if needed, and fight by any means against those that prevent them from claiming their benefits.

A foreign journalism trainer told me: "It's strange. Why do Vietnamese journalists always tend to take wide-frame pictures, whether they are still or moving pictures?" (Interviewee 98). Collectivism is indeed present in all other kinds of communication: propagandist pictures, artistic paintings, photographs, movies, etc. Everywhere you see a group or a mass of people with no single individuals standing out. Even in newspapers articles or TV stand-ins, a reporter tends to address themselves as 'we'/'us', instead of 'I'/'me'.

However, it is clear that those organisations or projects have outstanding individual as leaders or managers who often succeed (or go to hell). Individuals appear to be one of the key factors that differentiate the level of success or failure

in different Vietnamese organisations (see more in Vu and Pham 2008; AustralianAgencyforInternationalDevelopment 2009 and some other media support projects papers). My fieldwork also proves this, and thus confirms the literature review about the important role of leadership in organisations changes.

As mentioned earlier, Vietnam has been heavily influenced by Confucianism (for more than 2000 years (see Mai 2001). Confucianism's main ideology is to "cultivate one self's morality in order to successfully govern one's family, successfully govern one's family in order to govern the country, successfully govern the country in order to manage/govern the world". Thus, the 'self' is very big, many times too big that it makes it difficult to cooperate with each other for a joint cause. This is perhaps where Confucianism ideas clash – the big 'self' might very well conflict with 'collectivism' as mentioned earlier<sup>147</sup>. The result is, teamwork is difficult if at all possible unless there is a strong leader (as in the army), and 'collectivism' appears to be only an excuse for unwillingness to take responsibility.

Furthermore, family plays a very important role in a Confucian's life, and bigger society functions as a big family. This promotes, as mentioned earlier, a hierarchical society. Younger people are supposed to 'behave' and listen to the older or those in a higher position. Women are supposed to obey men. This slows the promotion of young talented people in general and women in particular as well as creates frustration in families and work places and, thus, slows down the development process of the whole country.

Another consequence is a family-based, meaning emotion or feeling-oriented, not result-oriented approach, as well as casual and unpunctuality manners. In this regard, however, there is believed to be a little difference between northern and southern ways of working. It is believed that Southern style tends to be a bit more American as the result of the American war while the northern one is more heavily influenced by Chinese and French who also are to blame by many Vietnamese people for their own bureaucratic working manners. However, no official research has been found that might possibly confirm or challenge this and, thus, it remains a claim that many Vietnamese people like to make.

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<sup>147</sup> For more about Confucianism's conflicting ideas, see Tran (1986), Tran (1996), Mai (2001), Tran (2006), Nguyen (2007).

However, currently there are a lot of changes affecting the people's behaviours. As Vietnam is integrating further into the international life, there is more and more interaction in work, in relationships, in business, etc. with foreigners. Therefore, they have to learn to adjust to a new multinational environment. Besides, the younger generations prefer watching American movies and South Korean soap operas<sup>148</sup> and listening to foreign music than Vietnamese ones and, thus, are behaving more and more American and South Korean. The changes are happening at a high speed.

Nevertheless, the changes are much slower in totally domestic institutions such as state agencies and many news organisations despite the fact that the government has been prioritising administration reforms.

### ***1.5. Media Advertisers***

There are unofficially more than 5000 companies that offer advertising services<sup>149</sup>. However, no research result has been found about advertisers and advertising in Vietnam. There have been some articles published in the media, but they are all pieces of opinions rather than evidence-based. Only one undergraduate dissertation (Quyen 2008) has been found about online advertising in one online newspaper Vietnamnet, which is the only newspaper that outsources all its advertising sales to another online advertising company. The dissertation shows that neither the advertising company nor the companies/organisations that advertise on Vietnamnet do any serious evaluation of the ad's effectiveness. Needless to say that online advertising is still much better than advertising on other media platforms in a sense that at least one can count the clicks to one specific ad or the page. However, according to the dissertation, the companies-respondents claim that they switch from print to online newspapers because it is cheaper and easier to see how many people actually click to their ads.

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<sup>148</sup> For decades South Korean soap operas kind of dominate Vietnamese popular television because South Korean companies provide free or cheap soaps that promote their products, especially fashion.

<sup>149</sup> In Vietnam, when company register with local authorities, they usually announce much more services than what they actually do. This is because the owners want to avoid the hassle of re-registering procedures. In the dissertation, the 5000 companies are those who really offer advertising services.



To my observations and some unofficial interviews with about 20 advertising staffs from media houses and ten advertisers, most advertisers in Vietnam choose popular media (big names, high circulations) or “peak time” on television or radio instead of really select the right media and the right time for their target customers. It is also common that advertisers, who are advertising staffs or middlemen working on behalf of retailers or organisations that want to advertise, choose the media that they have personal connection to or those that offer high commission rates.

This, together with the fact that media outlets do not have any research-based demographic statistics about their audience as well as do not have money to offer high commission, makes it very difficult for smaller newspapers to obtain ads. And in the time of economic crises like the last few years, this factor also make sensible advertisers and/or their customers to choose alternative advertising or even skip it totally. In mid- 2009, the number of ads pages in Tuoi Tre, the biggest daily in Vietnam, dropped half from average 40 to 20 pages/issues. Most middle-ranged dailies only had a few classified ads per issue.

### ***1.6. Media Audience***

Except for popular television programmes and channels, which have audience ranking done by an international market research company TNS<sup>150</sup> for advertising purposes, no intensive audience research has been found. Vietnamese news media do not have the habit of studying their audience, because of the monopoly (in broadcasting) and subsidy system.

However it is possible to make some broad general points. Vietnam has an adult literacy rate (% ages 15 and older) quite high at 93% as of 2009 (WorldBank 2010). However, as more than 70 per cent of the population are poor agricultural farmers who live in rural areas where newspapers are not popular, most print

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<sup>150</sup> According to TNS website, they also do media habit surveys that include all kinds of media twice a year in 4 big cities in Vietnam. However, all the editors-in-chief or their deputies of more than 20 news outlets I interviewed in 2009 said they did not use TNS’ services. I tried to contact TNS in order to find out what kinds of surveys they do but only received vague and broad answers from telephone operators. I could not make any further contact with them. Some of my colleagues -researchers who tried to contact them to get to know and potentially buy their services also complained about TNS’ information system which makes it impossible for private people to access.

publications are produced and distributed in urban areas. And, as mentioned before, the gap between rural and urban areas in terms of internet usage is even bigger than the case of print. Therefore, only radio and public service reach the majority of the population.

This means that all the media are competing for the remaining 30 per cent who live in big cities and towns, who are usually more educated and have higher incomes. These are also more difficult audiences who have more autonomy and who will switch to other media if they are not happy with a certain one.

More recently, when the subsidies are cut and the competition gets harder, newspapers have to “rethink audience” as “buyers” to attract readers and advertisers. However, due to old habit and a short budget, most newspapers still produce news that journalists believe their audience will need or want. Or they read a few tens of their readers’ letters/emails or listen to some old readers in yearly loyal readers meeting, and then naively believe that they are all their audiences’ opinions.

As of 2010, my research shows, a few big print newspapers have spent time and money to do reader research, but their research remains of small scales. They found, that human-interest, light-hearted and lifestyle stories are of more interest to the readers.

Online newspapers have of course more advantages with their electronic click and page view counts and, thus, more or less aware of the topics their audience are interested in. Most online newspapers report high readership in subjects such as entertainment, culture, society, sports, legal and crime, world, etc. but the low-profile-high-profit pages are business and finance which attract much more ads. Still, no near-complete picture of Vietnamese news media audience and their consumption behaviours has been found.

Regarding buying habits, most organisations and institutions subscribe to some certain publications, usually one or a few biggest serious newspapers such as Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien or Lao Dong and the biggest national and local party newspapers such as Nhan Dan and Hanoimoi in Hanoi or Saigon Giai Phong in Ho Chi Minh City, which are distributed through the national post service. Usually each department, and the whole organisation if it is small, share one copy of each

newspaper. The organisation's employees might bring the copies home for their family members to read.

Other individual readers do not often subscribe to newspapers. Instead, many choose to buy copies at street stalls and bring home for the whole family, and sometimes also neighbours, to read. Thus, the circulation numbers of Vietnamese news media do not at all reflect the readership. However, no attempt to study print publications readership has been found.

According to news stall agents, most frequent buyers stick to the popular newspapers of their choice, but many decide to buy the better of the day, meaning the newspaper copies that look interesting or said by the sellers to have good information. Therefore, developing a good relationship with news stall agents is vital to all newspapers that are distributed through this platform. The responding strategies used by newspapers are discussed in chapters IV to VI.

It is observed that, during the media's quiet time, e.g. after a clampdown, the readers become indifferent to big political-social newspapers and switch to lifestyle magazines or online sources. However, when there are hot social issues that might have a great impact on the people's life, most audience still trust the traditional media, especially the more reputed serious ones such as Tuoi Tre, Tien Phong, Thanh Nien, VNExpress, Lao Dong, etc.

Another important point is the technological achievements, especially the development of internet, has contributed to the improved audience's autonomy, giving them a lot more space to raise their voice through unofficial media which does not only affect the mainstream media but also the country's governance. Just recently, for example, on morning October 6, 2010, there was an explosion of the building storing firework materials for the big firework on 10.10.2010 which was capital Hanoi's 1000<sup>th</sup> birthday. Some online newspapers immediately reported the case. A few hours after, all the official news media's related contents were removed. However, "cyber citizens" and social media networks have already saved the pictures and spread everywhere, together with complaints and comments about how silly it was to try to hide the information. It is noted that, in order to prepare for the 1000<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, a lot of money had been spent on decorations and roadwork among other things and the results, consequences as

well as the amount of money had not been justified which had received massive complaints from citizens as well as widely covered in the news media before the media were told to shut up. There had also been many questions about Hanoi government's responsibility to the whole society because at the moment there were storms and floods in the middle-country provinces, which are already poor, causing a high death toll and financial losses. Later in the afternoon, Vietnam News Agency, which is the main official mouthpiece of the government in sensitive issues, published an article saying the explosion was an accident (not terrorism) and it would not affect the big celebration. Other newspapers were allowed to publish again about the incident, but the contents were more or less the same as the VNA's, as usual in similar cases.

However, in the next development two days after the explosion, Hanoi government decided to cancel the entire firework except at the explosion place, which was supposed to be the largest point, to use up the last firework material container. The money saved from the cancellation would be donated to the flooded provinces. This case clearly shows the power of internet/technology which empowers the public as the government, although very hesitant, has had to take into account the wide-spread public opinions. The incident also confirms the current debate within the government, and in public, about how reactive, not proactive, the news media governance is in Vietnam.

## **2. The Vietnamese news media**

This section briefly discusses changes in the news media in the industry's recent history. This research is focused on news media although other media might be mentioned where appropriate. Within this thesis, the terms "news media" and "the press" are used interchangeably. In Vietnam news media refers to officially registered mainstream news media. All print newspapers and magazines, online newspapers, television and radio stations by law are/or should be the mouthpieces of the government, or the Communist Party and public organisations, etc. and, thus, need to be registered as such. No private news media are allowed. Therefore, public fora, blogs, general websites or webpages, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. are not officially considered "news media". However, as

these have been playing a bigger and bigger role in the society and politics as well as affecting the mainstream media, they will be briefly discussed where appropriate.

### ***2.1. Contemporary history: Media after the American war 1975<sup>151</sup>***

As the development of the media in any society closely relates to the economic and political development of that society, the media development in Vietnam can be divided into five periods: 1975-85; 1986-89, 1990-96 and from 1997-2005 and after 2005 till now.

#### ***2.1.1. Country rebuilding 1975-1985: Under closed control - Media as advocates and propagandists***

It is noted that before and during the US-Vietnam war, the media situation was very different between the north and the south of Vietnam. In the north, the media was mainly used to advocate the unity of Vietnamese, to “mount intense anti-imperialist campaigns” and to “sustain morale on the home front”. It was not a time for creative innovation (Marr 2003; n.a. 2005a). In the south, there was at first more freedom. However, many southern writers then were jailed and newspapers shut down under Ngo Dinh Diem, then the President of the Republic of Vietnam, because they raised concerns over Diem’s monopolisation of power (Marr 2003). After the overthrow and killing of Diem in 1963, media with different voices flourished, and were again punished by the new southern government. However, commercial and foreign media were more tolerated (for more insights into Vietnam before and during the War, see Higgins 1982; Hy 2003).

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<sup>151</sup> This part is a review of Vietnamese media system literature. The lack of research on the media system in Vietnam shows that this topic is still “a taboo” to the majority of Vietnamese researchers. The research found has been mainly written by foreigners or Vietnamese refugees who might display insensitivity to or bias against Vietnamese media system and culture. Also, the majority of the literature found is about Vietnamese media as a system, and about press freedom and freedom of expression. And it is very descriptive, i.e. the main methods used are usually observation and policy or event analyses. This does not necessarily mean the data is invalid. However, it is suggested that more future research using other different methods such as interview, quantitative survey, etc. should be done to bring a more complete picture of the situation in Vietnam.

The end of the war brought intellectuals a tremendous hope for freedom of expression, for normality after decades of upheaval, trauma and sacrifice. However, the VCP very soon was demanding more sacrifices in the name of reconstruction and socialist development. The government pushed composers and performers to continue producing and performing politically correct “red music” and launched campaigns against listening to “blue” (sad, pessimistic) and “yellow music” (romantic, sexy) (Marr 2003).

The new Vietnam did not develop new press laws, but still used the one issued by its predecessor (Vietnam Democratic Republic) in 1957 which declared its role as “to ensure the people’s right to freedom of expression on the media and prohibit those who take advantage of the right to harm the fight for peace, uniting, independence, and democracy of the country” (Article 1, Press Law 1957). According to this law, any media, whether owned by state organisations, political parties, the people’s associations or privately owned, were “the people’s fighting tools” and had to “serve the interests of the Fatherland and people” as well as “defence the people’s democratic regime and support the state of Vietnam Democratic Republic.”

Before and after Vietnam’s independence, there were also some other political parties but they all supported the VCP. However, in 1989, Hanoi stopped their operations but claimed that they proposed to dissolve themselves. Also, no more privately-owned media were allowed.

Thus, the media in this period, especially the news media, served only as propaganda tool for the government and could only cover the information it wanted to disseminate. For instance, although the Central Committee resolutions were party documents and carried the force of law, they were secret. Dissemination of the resolutions for study by cadres therefore discriminated between different levels – the highest levels receiving the full details, but lower levels only a general outline. For non-Party members and ordinary people the information content threw an even dimmer light. In the areas of external relations and security discussion was internal and highly secretive. Party resolutions on relations with China and the Soviet Union, for example, were not published in *Nhan Dan* (the mouthpiece of the Party) at all (Dang and Beresford 1998).

Also, tens of thousands of the books and series published in the previous period under the defeated south government were destroyed. Tight controls on content remained. However, the intellectuals were still changing their attitudes. They were circulating unapproved typescripts more widely than anyone would have dared previously. The people who had shortwave receivers increasingly listened to foreign stations and shared the news with their friends. In the south, many families began to receive material support from overseas relatives, which soon became visits filled with animated sharing of information (Marr 2003).

In early 1980s, there was an emergence of occasional publications, often in a novel format, which called the status quo into question in a modest way. This kind of publication tested the rule of censorship and helped to prepare the ground for the more ambitious criticisms to come (Turley and Selden 1993; Marr 2003). Marr gave an example of a novel telling the story of a state fishing enterprise that was losing a large portion of its catch to the black market. The author captured the tensions between northern and southern cadres, between generations, between ideologues and pragmatists – without neat solutions or an upbeat ending.

In 1980, Nhan Dan even published an article by Dr Nguyen Khac Vien which called for fewer controls on the circulation of information. Dr Vien urged increased grassroots discussion in the media of current policies and performance, including opinions contrary to official statements. He especially required that surveys conducted by social scientists, though providing unpleasant results, not be restricted to a tiny official audience (Marr 2003).

It is interesting to notice that, according to Marr, in these first years after Vietnam's independence, leaders reluctantly relaxed controls on the media when the alternative was economic disaster. This is probably true. However, no evidence was found in literature. Marr himself also did not provide any explanations.

#### *2.1.2. Doi moi 1986-1989: Economic liberalisation and political relaxation-Media as watchdog and corruption fighters*

Changes in regulation of the media after 1986 form a part of Vietnam's broader political reform process, which formally started with the "renovation" or

“innovation” (*Doi Moi*) an expression popularised by the Sixth Party Congress (in December 1986.) This, according to Thayer (1992), was very much influenced by Soviet Union Communist Party’s General Secretary Goerbachev, who earlier that year launched his own reform program stressing openness (*glasnost*) and restructuring (*perestroika*).

Also, earlier in 1986, there was a rumour that Le Duan, the VCP General Secretary for twenty-six years, was going to die of cancer. He died in July. Some party members participated in unprecedented debates to elect delegates to the congress. As Marr (Marr 2003) observed:

“For the first time in the history of the party, elements of the media became involved in promoting one candidate as top leader versus another, although never being so indiscreet as to name who they supported or opposed. Journalists suddenly became more influential than ever before, especially by digging up embarrassing evidence on the clients of particular Politburo members. [However,] much journalistic evidence was used to fuel the rumour mill and never made its way into print.”

Heng (1999) cited “the campaign mounted from September 1986 by a dozen different media units against Ha Trong Hoa, party secretary of Thanh Hoa province and a protégé of Le Duc Tho (a conservative member of the VCP Central Committee). Heng believed this led to Le Duc Tho’s apparent proposed – just prior to the opening of the Sixth Party Congress –, that three elderly leaders – himself, Truong Chinh, and Pham Van Dong – step down simultaneously. The Congress then elected Nguyen Van Linh as compromise general secretary.

At the congress, the VCP decided to carry out limited political reforms by renovating the party organisation and the state apparatus; loosening controls over the press and media, and implementing a regime of socialist legality (Thayer 1992). After the Congress, although the majority of ministers, especially those in the key positions, were Central Committee members, several were not (Dang and Beresford 1998: 87-8).

Nguyen Van Linh, soon after becoming the General Secretary in 1986, began economic liberalization. Linh maintained party supremacy in the political sphere,



but he revitalized Vietnam's economy by lessening state control and introducing elements of a free market system (Inforplease 2005).

From 1986, the VCP relaxed its control on the introduction of foreign information to Vietnam as well as circulation of information within the country.

Under Linh's power, renovation of the media has involved attempts to end its purely propaganda role and allow it to be more critical, and to publish a diversity of views; in short, from "voice of the party" to "voice of the people." The press was encouraged to "speak frankly, speak the truth" (*noi thang, noi that*) (Forbes, Hull et al. 1991).

Thayer (1992) believed that:

"Greater freedom was given to writers and artists. Party control over the selection process of deputies to the National Assembly was loosened, and elected members were given greater scope to express critical views. The combined effects of economic and political reform led to a wide variety of activity conducted independently of party control, most notably among the press, the video and publishing media, war veterans, private entrepreneurs and to a lesser extent among students and other groups."

Indeed, Vietnam's programme of political democratisation arguably made its greatest impact in the press and media. In 1987, the VCP announced the unlimited rights of every citizen to publish in the press articles criticising official organs, bureaucrats, or cadres and to have a public response from those criticised (Porter 1993).

The press was considered not only the mouthpiece of the party and leading bodies, but also a rostrum for the voices of the broad masses of the people. The slogan "the people know, the people discuss, the people carry out and the people follow up" (*dan biet, dan ban, dan lam, dan kiem tra*) was implemented during this period.

As Marr (Marr 2003: 279) observed:

"The pace of investigative reporting increased, and soon spread from central media to provincial and city newspapers and journals. At

meetings of the Vietnam Journalists' Association, members compared notes and passed resolutions urging further relaxation of official controls... Journalists were joined by creative writers, literary critics, essayists, artists, and musicians, publicly encouraged by Tran Do, head of the party's Culture and Art Commission."

Even, in May 1987, a new column named "Things which must be done immediately" appeared in *Nhan Dan*, the party's mouthpiece, written by N.V.L (Nguyen Van Linh's initials) (Thayer 1992; Porter 1993) and (Turley and Selden 1993)<sup>152</sup>.

In his column, Linh criticised corruption and other negative phenomena in Vietnam and urged the press in particular and the public in general to participate more actively in reporting on corruption and misuse of power by party and state officials. He called for audiences' opinions to be sent to the media and state bodies.

The appearance of this column "signalled the onset of a period of press liberalisation, an increase in citizen self-expression, and accountability of government officials" (Thayer 1992). Thayer cited Alan Dawson saying in the *Bangkok Post* that Linh's press campaign had two consequences: it led to a spate of muck-raking that left government bureaucrats and mid-level party officials uneasy and it led to the publication of a large number of new periodicals. Linh's campaign was also considered his attempt to develop a tactical alliance with media practitioners, using them to improve his position (see Marr 2003).

The freer press contributed to the success of the party rectification campaign 1987-90 when nearly 130,000 party members were disciplined and almost 80,000 expelled (Thayer 1992: 7). In 1988, *Nhan Dan* revealed that the party officials directly hired workers for production work, engaged in trade or operated as

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<sup>152</sup> According to Abuza, Z. (2001). Renovating politics in contemporary Vietnam. Boulder, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers.

in 1987 Linh began column "talk and act" in *Nhan Dan* and *Sai Gon Giai Phong* to promote his reforms and criticise those cadres who blocked them. In fact, the column was called "Things which must be done immediately". However people often called it "Noi va Lam" (Talk and Act) according to the author's initials N.V.L. It is also noted that in Vietnam there is a saying: Speech (talk) should be accompanied by action.

money-lenders. (Until recently, party members were not allowed to do private business.)

The party's policy of openness, and the resulting inflow of foreign ideas, encouraged some members of the public and the press to speak out. However, the degree of press liberalisation was limited as no more than 30 of Vietnam's 253 newspapers and periodicals actively supported *Doi Moi* (Huynh 1988). And, while the press in the South started to publish such criticisms the press in the north did not follow the example very strongly.

Despite the changes in political terms, according to Thayer (1992), the most important factor in the liberalisation of press activity was economic. Under *Doi Moi*, the state cut down its financial subsidies to the press. Consequently, newspapers and magazines began to explore popular topics (including violence and sex) and to accept advertising for the first time in order to survive. The number of publications available for sale rose rapidly as did the number of weekend supplements and special colour editions. Many publications evaded the regulations on registration. Others published without formal approval.

Marr (Marr 1993), Turley et al (1993) and Marr (2003) seemed to agree with Thayer that the nature of publishing operations also had been changing for other reasons besides the political one. Due to the reduction of government subsidies, compelling writers, editors, printers, and distributors had to find new ways to support their families: attempts were made to satisfy the increasing demands of the audiences. Translations from foreign media sold well, so did tabloids, which were filled with sensational stories about killings, accidents, crimes, broken-ups, human foibles, grotesque babies – the material previously excluded from publication.

In this period, consequent to the more general loosening of government controls, a few western movies began to supplement the standard diet of Soviet and Eastern European films on TV, news programs became more interesting, and reporters greatly expanded their interviewing of ordinary citizens on the street, in the marketplace and private home. The television received news from a Soviet satellite, which increasingly offered scenes of parliamentary confrontation in

Duma, large antigovernment demonstrations, and the eventual demise of communist regimes in a whole series of capital cities (Marr 2003).

In short, as Tonnesson (1993: 22) observed:

“In the year 1987-89, freedom blossomed in Vietnamese society, not only within trade and commerce but also in art, culture and the emerging political and ideological debates. For the first time, visitors to Vietnam were able to have frank political conversations with Vietnamese colleagues and friends who no longer repeated official viewpoints but spoke their own mind. At the same time, the Vietnamese media became bolder in their criticism of bureaucracy, corruption, abuse of power and mismanagement.”

However late nineteen eighties saw Vietnam still wrestling with the abolition of a centrally planned economy and searching for its place in the international community after having been isolated and boycotted for so many years for its occupation of Cambodia and (implicitly) for its victory over the United States earlier on (Kleinen 2001).

The liberalisation of the press in the late 1980s resulted in an explosion of unsanctioned activity which was very short lived (Abuza 2001). In July 1989, the Ministry of Information reported that papers and publishing houses at central and local levels had violated regulations on addenda and supplements to periodicals and special issues, causing a chaotic situation. By late 1989, demands for even greater press freedom so disturbed the party leaders that they pulled back from the limited openness of the Sixth Congress. The clampdown most probably was also influenced by the Tiananmen Square case in China and the breakdown of the Eastern block earlier the same year.

Moreover, the party's conservatives started to regain power and sought to re-impose party control. Nguyen Van Linh was moved to call on the press in Ho Chi Minh City to tone down its criticism because this led to a loss of the public's confidence in the party. The last N.V.L column was published in March after a four-month period of silence (Thayer 1992: 8). Since then, many people started to change the famous phrase “Noi va Lam” (Talk and Act) to “Noi va Lo” (Talk and Ignore).

Later, the Ministry of Information took steps to ensure that existing press rules and regulations were observed. It cancelled all temporary permits and suspended eight periodicals for failure to comply with the law. To Hoa, the editor of the party's newspaper *Saigon Giai Phong* was forced to retire. Vu Kim Hanh, the editor of *Tuoi Tre*, a popular southern youth newspaper, came under fire after publishing a frank account of authoritarianism in North Korea.

The conservative counter-reaction was most strident at the seventh plenum of the VCP Central Committee in August 1989, which convened to discuss 'urgent ideological issues'. After the plenum the VCP started a more systematic crackdown. General Tran Do, who supported press openness, was dismissed from his post as head of the VCP Central Committee Department of Culture and Arts. New censorship regulations were imposed and many of the newspapers and magazines which had appeared since 1987 closed down (Thayer 1992).

### *2.1.3. Period 1990 – 1996: Control retightened*

1991 was a decisive year for Vietnam; withdrawal from Cambodia, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the end of economic aid from Russia, and the failure of an attempt to normalise relations with the USA were traumatic for the party leadership in Hanoi. On the other hand, Vietnam achieved relation normalisation with China which led to greater cross-border trade with the great neighbour. Also Vietnam managed to keep up its economic relations with the successor states to the Soviet Union.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, held in 1991, saw a loss of power of most avid reformers. Conservative general Le Duc Anh became president in 1992. He and his followers were influential in the army, police and the party bureaucracy while the reformers, led by prime minister Vo Van Kiet, seemed to dominate the new economic institutions, the civilian ministries and the majority of the National Assembly (Tonnesson 1993). Of course, in fact, the new official power order reflected the power reinforcement of the conservative military force since 1989.

Vietnam's gradual participation in the global economy engendered a localisation process which did upset the ruling communist party, but was very much to the

liking of the emerging middle classes in the major Vietnamese cities (Kleinen 2001: x).

In the nineteen nineties Vietnam became the second global player on the rice export market. The rationale behind Vietnam's opening up to the world market was driven by the grass-roots efforts of peasant households in the early nineteen eighties who abandoned the collective system and engaged in private contracts with the cooperatives. This led to an upsurge of rice production. In 2000-01 Vietnam was the largest rice exporter in the world after Thailand ( TheEconomist 2000 cited in ; Jeffries 2001). Also, by early 1990s, as a result of the technology development all over the world, the volume of telecommunications traffic between Vietnam and the outside world increased dramatically, e.g. in 1990 it was eighteen times that of 1986 (Marr 1993).

As it has shown in south-eastern countries, it is impossible to open up the country to the global flows of capital without letting the flows of culture and information come into the country as well. By 1992, the Vietnamese had become more accustomed to speaking openly even with foreigners. Dissenting views could be raised within restricted circles, although not in the media (Tonnesson 1993). Those who supported freedom and democracy were not sure how far they could go in trying out new ideas without provoking the party's conservative members' reaction. Indeed, as (Tonnesson 1993: 22) concluded:

“Vietnam is going through a period of transition. New thoughts, whether home-bred or imported, have a greater chance of being heard and reflected upon. But it remains to be seen who dares put them forward.”

Tonnesson found that behind every newspaper or other media in Vietnam there was an association or institution which had to apply for a permit to publish. The press did not have to pass through any government censorship before it was printed but editors who did not want to lose their jobs had to be careful about what allowed to be printed. In other words, self-censorship was very strong among the media.

Nevertheless, there were still some small groups of intellectuals who raised concerns about democracy and pluralism. Among them are “avant-garde authors

and artists” (Tonnesson 1993) such as Nguyen Huy Thiep, Duong Thu Huong, Nguyen Khac Truong, etc.. However, their writings were then forbidden from dissemination. Some other prominent intellectuals such as physicist Nguyen Thanh Giang and mathematician Phan Dinh Dieu, who was considered “loyal opposition” – loyal to the nation and socialism but opposed to the party and government’s one-party policy and the way toward socialism- also promoted pluralism, democracy and human rights such as freedom of expression. As a result, Nguyen Thanh Giang was not allowed to stand as an independent candidate in the elections for the National Assembly in 1992. Phan Dinh Dieu had circulated petitions to the party before the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1991 but did not get them published. Later on he criticised Marxism-Leninism for being an outdated ideology and expressed clear democratic principles in interviews with international news agencies. In 1993, he was ousted as vice-chairman of the National Centre for Scientific Research (Tonnesson 1993).

Despite Vietnam’s “obvious violation of international legal standards”, Tonnesson was optimistic because Vietnam had just subscribed to the international conventions on human rights and actively striven to accommodate its legislation on them. He believed:

“the new Vietnamese constitution of 1992 improved the human rights situation at least partially in that it establishes that no one can be detained without a ruling from the People’s Court or the People’s Office of Supervision and Control (or at least its approval). However, it makes an exception for “flagrant offenses”.

Nevertheless, Tonnesson also made an important observation that the rights granted by the chapter on the “fundamental rights” of the constitution were taken away in the constitution’s other articles, as well as in several laws and “of course in practice

By the early 1990s, Vietnam had about 300 approved papers and journals, two news services, a central TV system, eight or nine local TV stations, a central radio station and twenty local radio stations. There were more than 6000 accredited journalists (Tien Phong Feb 1990, cited in Turley and Selden 1993). Television news and current affairs programmes remained subject to particular party

surveillance, yet they had come a long way since the days of talking heads merely reading newspaper articles or quoting provincial hog statistics. In frank imitation of CNN, an increasing proportion of human interest stories were being presented live, which put greater responsibility on individual reporters. TV reporters were also being assigned to investigate stories in depth. TV panel discussions that pit different interest group and viewpoints against each other were increasingly acceptable (Forrester 1998). During this period, western embassies and private corporations provided Vietnam Television (VTV) with many free-to-air programmes, in hope of gaining an early edge over their foreign competitors. Mexican, Brazilian and Australian soap operas were very popular. VTV began to gain considerable revenue from advertising. It can be said that there was a boom in television in Vietnam at this time.

However, the party began to worry about its losing control of television, thus it proceeded to rein in local stations, to redirect advertising revenues, and to scrutinise foreign programme content and ads vigorously (Marr 2003). As a result, foreign programme providers began to terminate their free-to-air donations. At another level, the party instructed local officials to enforce restrictions on satellite dishes.

The new press and publication laws set strict limits to the freedom. The press law was passed in 1989 and came into effect in 1990. According to this law, the media are the “mouthpieces of the party, government, social organisations” and lastly, “of the people’s forum” (Article 1, Press Law 1990).

On the one hand, this law affirms “the rights to press freedom and to freedom of expression on the media” where “no organisation or person should prevent, limit the media and journalists from practising their profession” (article 2). The people have the right to be “informed by the media on all aspects of the country and the world” and to contact and inform the media without being censored. The law also entitles them to criticise and contribute to the state and party on the media. The news content is not censored before being published. On the other hand, it says “no one should take the advantage of press freedom and freedom of expression on the media to invade the state, collective and personal interests.” In order to “ensure that the freedom of expression in the press is fulfilled”, beside some common-sense prohibitions, the law forbids the media from “inciting the people



to oppose the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or undermining the national unity bloc". The media are also not allowed to "reveal the state, military, security, economic, foreign affairs secrets and other secrets proposed by the law" (article 10.) Both Vietnamese media and foreigners were asked not to criticise the party's opposition to pluralism, the socialist line of development, or, redundantly, the party's leadership monopoly (Turley and Selden 1993).

Unlike the press, who are not under pre-production censorship, Vietnamese publishing houses have to submit all manuscripts for approval before they are printed, and unauthorised literature may not be imported or disseminated. However, the book market has grown under *Doi Moi*, and many books have been published which would have been banned a few years ago although the non-conformist books are normally published in very small quantities. They are sold out very quickly, then copied in photocopy shops and spread also very quickly.

The new publication law in (1993), signed by conservative general Le Duc Anh, which set stricter regulations on publishing, "makes it possible to prevent virtually anything from being published" (Tonnesson 1993: 27). In order to "contribute to guarantee the right to freedom of expression" (preamble), this law rules that "Publishing is cultural and ideological activities implemented by producing and disseminating publication products to the mass, not simply a commercial activity" (article 1) Therefore, like the press law, the publication law prohibits:

- materials against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or attempting to undermine the national unity bloc.
- Materials inciting violence, invasion wars, causing hatred among nationalities and people of different nations; disseminating reactionary culture or ideologies, pornographic or decadent lifestyles, crimes, social evils, superstition; and damaging good morals and customs of the nation.
- Materials revealing party, state, military, national security, economic and foreign affairs secrets, citizens' personal life secrets and other secrets stipulated by law.
- Materials distorting history; rejecting revolutionary achievements; offending great men and national heroes; slandering or damaging

reputations of organisations or reputation and dignity of citizens (article 22).

The limits to the media's freedom of expression were implemented through administrative and judicial measures such as withdrawal of publication licences, replacement of editors, arrests and public trials. According to *The Information Freedom and Censorship World Report* (1991), both before and after the adoption of the press law, a number of newly-established newspapers were banned and several editors were forced to resign. Repression was most severe in the south, perhaps because of a more independent and outspoken press there than in the north. For more examples of the crackdown in this period, see the chapter "The Battle over intellectual freedom and freedom of the press" in *Renovating politics in contemporary Vietnam* by Z.Abuza (2001). Amnesty International (1992) reported that in 1991 there were at least 80 political prisoners in Vietnam. They were those who "conspired against the state." Some of them were held in custody for sustained periods without trial. Others were imprisoned for having disseminated their opinions and trying to organise opposition groups. In 1992 *Radio Irina* attacked the Vietnamese communist regime and, under the pressure of the Vietnamese government and party, in 1993, it was closed down by Russian authorities (Tonnesson 1993).

While the crackdown on the press and publishing was quite heavy, there were more relaxations in relations with other media, especially videos. Almost all coffee houses in cities and many in the countryside screened pornographic videos (with local police protection) to attract customers. This would have resulted in a national expose and long jail sentences a few years earlier (Thayer 1992; Marr 1993).

Revising different aspects of democracy in Vietnam in general and the press in particular, Tonnesson (1993: 25) concluded that:

"Hence, when answering the question 'is there a free and independent press in today's Vietnam? The answer must be 'no'. The press is neither independent nor free in any absolute sense, but it is significantly freer and more independent than used to be the case before 1987."

After the Eighth Party Congress in 1996, a desire by the Party to regain the initiative was seen when a number of ministers who had failed to gain Central Committee positions were replaced by Central Committee members. However, generally speaking, the trend was the increasing role and power of the legislature and government. (Dang and Beresford 1998: 91).

#### *2.1.4. Period 1997 – 2005: Pre-WTO news media - More freedom? More control?*

The progress of democratisation in Vietnam is not easy to figure. As Borton put it: “sometimes every step forward seems to be paired with a move back, in the direction of a hardliner communist party.” After the economic reforms of the early and mid-nineteen eighties had ushered in a period of relative openness and prosperity, the end of the nineteen nineties saw a new phase of retardation and a stalemate position of the Communist Party in power. The leadership professed that the legal framework, refined by the State during the period 1990-2000<sup>153</sup>, provided the citizens with adequate democratic rights, including the right to free expression and of freedom of religion, but in the meantime it gave ample warning against hostile internal and external forces (Kleinen 2001). Similarly, the Human Rights Watch Report (1999) concluded that “the unexpected release of some of the country’s best-known political prisoners was a highlight” but press freedoms remained strictly curtailed.

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<sup>153</sup> In 1999 the National Assembly passed the Law “Amendments to Press Law” with include small changes such as:

- Adding Internet and online newspapers as part of news media
- Adding “contribution to maintain the purity of Vietnamese and ethnic minorities’ languages” to the news media’s responsibilities.
- Adding some more details to the media’s responsibility to correct false information. However, the amendment is still very vague.
- The owning organisations have more responsibility such as to check the news media operation and to be accountable to the mistakes the new media outlets make
- Similarly, journalists are entitled to more responsibility and subject to legal charges if they make mistakes. Journalists also are encouraged to receive professional training.

Article 17 has the biggest amendments. It gives the government, represented by Ministry of Information and Communication, much more detailed rights and duties toward the news media. It also, for the first time, confirms that news media are allowed to do businesses and provide services to obtain more revenues in order to reinvest in and develop themselves. It says the news media receive incentives in terms of taxes and duties. However, the under-law decree followed still requires that news media pay 28% tax like other businesses which brings a lot of complaints from the media. More current decision has just been made (October 2010) that allows some incentives to the media but the tax level is still the same.

In this period, differences between reformers and conservatives at top levels of the political power structure appeared to deepen. Veteran revolutionaries and influential intellectuals tried to test the newly-installed Communist Party leadership during the year by openly criticising the government and advocating for increased democracy, economic reforms and press freedom.

As a result of the technological revolution all over the world, Vietnamese newspapers and magazines underwent huge changes. They became computer-designed, multi-coloured, and as lavishly illustrated as periodicals elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Journalists used computer word processing. Reporters were permitted to access a variety of foreign news sources rather than having to depend entirely on the Vietnam News Agency as in the past. Photos of scantily clad young women became standard fare (Marr 2003). Police tabloids were filled with lurid tales of sex and violence, of gang crimes and prostitution.

Press coverage of the National Assembly became more important. Newspapers devoted full pages to assembly proceedings and questions and criticism raised by representatives to government's members. Legal reporters enjoyed new room to question police behaviour and court procedures. Newspapers led public campaigns for justice in specific criminal cases, often embarrassing some party and state officials in the process. The press also often targeted corrupt officials, although this was risky unless political clearance was secured in advance. The structural roots of corruption were not yet subject to investigation and analysis. Economic reporting improved considerably with writers using statistics more carefully, presenting bad as well as good news, and canvassing a variety of policy options (Koh 2000; Marr 2003). This change is believed to owe a lot to foreign-aid media support programmes that aimed at improving the media's professionalism, ethics and management as well as increasing dialogues about media policy making and media's role in the society (see more in section 2.2.8.4).

One of the most stellar reporting efforts by the Vietnamese press involved insightful investigative articles in 2002 on one of its own: Tran Mai Hanh, then deputy chairman of the Vietnamese Journalists' Association, general director of Radio Voice of Vietnam and a powerful member of the party's Central Committee. The coverage, started by *Thanh Nien*, led to Hanh's charges and imprisonment for having links to the Vietnamese mafia and accepting bribes for

suppressing information (AFP 2002; BBCNews 2002; Borton 2005). It is noted that at first the party wanted to ignore the case and let Hanh resign quietly, thus ordered a press blackout. However, *Thanh Nien* was determined to push the case forward.

While the newspapers enjoyed much more freedom of expression, broadcast news content was still strictly controlled. The managers of the national radio Voice of Vietnam (VOV) and television VTV were, and still are, members of the Party Central Committee. My interviews in 2005 with VTV's reporters and editors revealed that the previous head, Mr Ho Anh Dung, was more liberal and the staff enjoyed more freedom handling politically sensitive issues. However, under the current leader, Mr Vu Van Hien - who got his power in 2001, more controls and self-censorship were present. The journalists sometimes felt their mouths "covered".

The authorities continued to restrict the viewing of foreign TV stations via satellite. Only senior officials, international hotels and foreign businesses were permitted to use satellite receiving equipment<sup>154</sup>.

However, as many major Vietnamese media began to adopt online reporting, online publishing in general became widely popular (Borton 2005).

After years enjoying more freedom, these years see that the government again began to restrict online media. Internet sites considered to be "reactionary" were blocked (BBC 2005) and the government stopped Internet access in unlicensed cafes from time to time. In 2004 the government introduced a regulation requiring internet cafes to register their customers' personal details which created a lot of debates and complaints (Pham, 2005). The government explained that it just wanted to "fight pornography and evil influences from the West", not to limit the public in any way<sup>155</sup>. Early in the 2005, one of the most popular websites,

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<sup>154</sup> This is not the case today, though, when anyone subscribed to a pay TV network can watch the CNN or BBC which have been considered "enemies" of the government and party, or they can of course see the content over the Internet.

<sup>155</sup> This regulation, like many others in any field, later was abandoned without any official notice. It is believed that usually the government would impose a ban on anything considered by them difficult or impossible to control. However, the bans then could be quietly removed without official decisions or, in other words, ignored, if the public protest is too strong or if the risk identified by the government as lower. This approach could also be used to test the public reactions against potentially controversial bills.

*tintucvietnam.com*, which provided both hard and entertainment news, was shut down and the editor-in-chief of *VNExpress* - the leading online newspaper – was sacked. Both newspapers had published news and readers' angry complaints about the government's importing expensive limousines unnecessarily. *VNExpress* since then toned down noticeably (Pham 2005).

## **2.2. Post WTO Vietnamese media**

Generally speaking, in terms of politics, the media situation remains more or less the same as in the previous period, especially the last few years when Vietnam was running for the WTO.

According the current press law (Amended Press Law 1999), Ministry of Culture and Information was all media's administrator/authority. The ministry's Press Bureau (or Authority of Press) in fact was the main body that dealt with all the media platforms – issuing and withdrawing permission to establish news outlets and press cards, monitoring media content, etc. The Press Bureau then had a lot of administrative power in the industry.

However, as of December 2007, the government rearranged some ministries and the “information part” of the ministry was merged with posts and telecommunication to become Ministry of Information and Communication (Decree 187/2007/NĐ-CP)<sup>156</sup>. From early 2008 Minister Le Doan Hop announced that the new ministry established four administrative bureaus to govern the news media: Authority of Press in charge of print news media, Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information in charge of broadcasting and Internet content, Authority of Foreign Information Services in charge of Vietnamese media overseas and foreign media/journalists' work in Vietnam as well as promotes Vietnamese values abroad, and Bureau of Information Security which basically can be understood as a monitoring organisation that “provides mechanisms to deal with those who publish false information” (Viet 2007).

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<sup>156</sup>Decree 187/2007/NĐ-CP signed by the Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung which came into force on 15 January 2008. see <http://mic.gov.vn/vbqpp/Lists/Vn%20bn%20QPPL/DispForm.aspx?ID=7020> last accessed 22 April 2011.

The emergence of three more administrative authorities has raised concerns about the potential overlapping and confusion that might make it difficult for the media houses to operate, because most try to become multimedia corporations.

From the party's side, there is a Central Party Department of Ideology which is a close consulting body of the Central Party in terms of mass media, ideology, and culture, etc. and which closely monitors all the media's content and a special attention is given to the news media<sup>157</sup>. As it is a party-ruling country, the Ideology Department can be said to have much more power than the Ministry as the governor, especially now as no one from the Ministry (i.e. neither the minister nor his deputies) is a member of the Party Central Committee.

Every week on Tuesday morning there is a meeting between the Ideology Department's representatives and news media high-level representatives where warnings are given to the media outlets that have gone beyond written and unwritten limits, which are usually vague and elastic. Interestingly, it is observed that those news organisations that deliberately want to push the boundaries<sup>158</sup> often choose to publish sensitive content just after the meeting, meaning they will have a week before the next meeting for the issues to be "cooled down" and, thus, the sanction will be less harsh<sup>159</sup>.

Besides, there are "cultural police" who are from the Bureau of Information and Communication Security under Ministry of Police (official name: People's Public Security Forces)<sup>160</sup>. This cultural police force also monitors news media content. They could question journalists or basically anyone who discuss, either on the mass media or unofficial forums, matters that could be considered sensitive such as confidential discussions within the National Assembly or Party Congress about pluralism<sup>161</sup>.

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<sup>157</sup> See the Party's Decision on the Department of Ideology's function and duties on the Party's website at [http://www.cpv.org.vn/cpv/Modules/News/NewsDetail.aspx?co\\_id=30583&cn\\_id=148636](http://www.cpv.org.vn/cpv/Modules/News/NewsDetail.aspx?co_id=30583&cn_id=148636), accessed 22 April 2011.

<sup>158</sup> For more discussion about pushing boundaries, read more in the following part and section 1.3.

<sup>159</sup> This information is provided by the interviewees who are editors-in-chief or their representatives at the meetings. The information is also considered a fact meaning known to every journalist in Vietnamese media context.

<sup>160</sup> see website [www.mps.gov.vn](http://www.mps.gov.vn) for the description of the ministry's offices.

<sup>161</sup> The information is also considered a fact meaning known to every journalist in Vietnamese media context. However, many journalists claim that they have never had any problems with the

All the above mentioned censorship or monitoring seem very serious, and in some cases it could be really serious and lead to arrests as mentioned below. However, the reality is believed to be much more relaxing. Usually only political journalists, and every now and then cultural or economic journalists, might be warned. Most journalists asked say they are not scared and they still push the boundaries if they could. It is said that the meetings with the Ideology Department are usually in an equal tone and the authority usually only gives hard warning if the case is considered huge. Cultural policemen are also said to be polite and respectful in most cases. Therefore, self-censorship is more evident in Vietnamese news media, where everyone from reporters to editors and editors in chief makes their own decisions on what content should or should not cross the boundaries, which are vague, elastic and different from time to time depending on different authorities, and of course the last decision is made by the editor-in-chief or his representatives<sup>162</sup>.

Regarding the law; social, economic and technological changes have made Vietnamese press law and under-law regulations outdated. In late 2007 the government, represented by the Ministry of Information and Communication as news media administrator, started to evaluate the implementation of the amended press law 1999. The Ministry proposed changes and hoped they would be approved by 2008. However, the approval process is still going on and it was believed to be delayed until the Party Congress took place in January 2011. It is noted that the bill was not open for public debates but only is discussed among the policy makers and lawyers. However, somehow the discussions have found their way to end up in the mass media and journalists' forums (see Phan 2008; Tran 2010).

The bill confirms that no private news media are allowed and that there is no pre-publishing censorship but publications must be deposited for reference after being printed. However, it tightens the responsibility to publish the news sources. It requires institutions and individuals to provide information to the news media and the news media to reflect the information correctly. It also requires that the sources be accountable for their information but it is not sure if the news media

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cultural police meaning never been summoned by them. Usually only political, cultural and economic reporters have more frequent contacts with the police.

<sup>162</sup> See note 24 and 26.



and journalists have associated accountability and if yes, how accountable they should be. This is of concern to individual journalists because the fact is, even when they only publish what their sources say they still are subject to civil and criminal charges if the provided information turns out to be false or defamative (Phan 2008; Mai 2009)<sup>163</sup>.

Another concern is that the new bill does not propose changes in terms of correction. The bill vaguely says: “In case the news outlet does not correct the mistakes and apologise the victim(s), the latter have the right to appeal to the media owning organisations and/or the media administrative organisations or start legal proceedings in courts” which might be interpreted that if they have already corrected and apologised, the victims have no right to appeal. It is well known and has been widely discussed among media professionals as well as the public that many news media publish false/incorrect information and then just have a sentence, most of the time hidden, saying “to correct” or “to restate” (Phan 2008; Phuong and Linh 2009).

The bill proposes that news media must deposit all their publication copies for reference two hours after being published, otherwise they will get a fine of 500,000 to 1,500,000 VND (17-50 GBP), which is widely criticised as a silly condition because most dailies are released at around 2 or 3am when all the state administrative officers are... sound asleep (Phan 2008; Tran 2010).

There has also been criticism about the proposal of each news media organisation having an extra position called chairman above the editor-in-chief. That person’s duty is not clarified and, thus, is interpreted as only the party and government’s measure to better control the news media. Also, the bill suggests in order to be an editor-in-chief, one must have had worked as a registered journalist, i.e. been issued a press card, for at least 3 years; been in leading positions and received press management training, etc.

The bill claims to offer incentives to news media but gives no details to change the fact that the news media now pay income tax of 28% like any other kinds of businesses (Phan 2008).

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<sup>163</sup> Both of these authors are widely cited in the popular media.

On one hand the bill confirms state ownership; it legitimises the so-far-unwritten practice that news media collaborate with private domestic and international individuals and companies in design-layout, printing, distributing, marketing, etc., as well as producing non-political content, meaning basically all steps of media production except content that might be considered threatening to the power of the highest party and government.

However, it is noted that, laws are not absolute and usually subject to interpretation and implementation. We will need to see how the under-law regulations interpret the new press law. Many cases seem to have proven the claim that in Vietnam, if there is something the government finds difficult to control, they will put a ban on it, meaning there will be an under-law decree or decision on that specific matter, or there might be some other equivalent measure. There is a list of confidential issues/information which is not allowed to be published by the news media. The only “slight” problem for journalists is that the list itself is also confidential! Some journalists even wonder if such a list ever exists.

Facebook is another case. It is believed to have developed beyond the government’s ability to control and considered by the government to pose a danger to socialism and the party leadership. As it is not considered or registered as a news media outlet and, thus, not subject to the press law and regulations, firewalls have been set unofficially for a few years now. However, the people always find ways and it has become sort of an exciting hide and seek or chasing game between state and private IT experts. In fact, the alleged control over Facebook has been highly discussed and criticised as one indicator of the party and government’s failure.

Overall, the government’s governance of the media has always been criticised as behind the media developments<sup>164</sup>, which has some consequences/results:

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<sup>164</sup> Media governors themselves confirm this. Deputy Minister Do Quy Doan said in an interview with VTC reporter that “(Media) governors always have to pull ourselves to catch up with development... We have to go with media development and support the media to develop”. Another case is an interview (Anh, V. (2007). *Se lap them 3 co quan quan ly bao chi*. [VNExpress.net](http://VNExpress.net). Hanoi.

with the Minister of Information and Communication who says: “state governing bodies are ‘chasing after’ the strong development of the news media”. The interview was originally conducted and published by VNExpress.net, one of the biggest online newspapers in Vietnam and

- Slowing down the media's development, especially in terms of technology and economics. One example is pay television as mentioned earlier.
- On the other hand, this, together with the fact that there is no pre-publishing censorship, leaves space for media houses/journalists to push boundaries as regard to politically sensitive issues (see more in chapter IV).

The pressure from WTO negotiations and later official agreements, other international treaties and organisations, as well as the internal pressure from within the society, has made Vietnamese government and CPV be, at least officially, more determined to pursue administrative reform and fight corruption<sup>165</sup>.

Just a few weeks after Vietnam entered the WTO, the government established the Anti-Corruption Committee which deals with citizens' complaints and which should research and propose anti-corruption measurements to the government. On the launching ceremony of the Committee, the media also received the assignment of continuing to contribute to the anti-corruption cause from a deputy prime minister (Tien and Tuan 2007). This assignment, which usually requires significant detachment and usually carried out by non-state media in other countries (McKinley 2009), is obviously a difficult task taking into account the fact that Vietnamese media are asked to uncover corruption within a power system where they are a part of. In such a context, 2006 was considered a prosperous year for anti-corruption in Vietnam in the general and the media in particular.

One big case is a widespread coverage short after the tenth Congress in April 2006, about the National Bank's decision to use polymer bank notes, where the

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republished by many other online newspapers and forums. However, it cannot be retraced on VNExpress.net now. It has obviously been removed, probably for political reason. However, the full interview can be seen at [http://www.tin247.com/se\\_lap\\_them\\_3\\_co\\_quan\\_quan\\_ly\\_bao\\_chi-1-84935.html](http://www.tin247.com/se_lap_them_3_co_quan_quan_ly_bao_chi-1-84935.html) and many other websites/forums.

It is noted that it is common that online newspapers or websites publish and remove articles afterwards for some reason, mostly political.

<sup>165</sup> Since 1986 with Doi Moi (Renovation) Reform, Vietnam has always been struggling with administration hierarchy and fighting corruption, meaning power abuse among state officials thanks to loopholes in the legal and regulatory systems as well as the incentives for corruption resulted from a dual economy where planned and market mechanisms co-exist Gainsborough, M. (2003). *Corruption and the Politics of Economic Decentralization in Vietnam*. London, Routledge.  
 . The news media's role in fighting corruption has also been discussed in the previous section.

former Bank Governor and his son were accused by the media as corrupt and taking bribes from an Australian company. The media also covered the scandal of the former governor in the purchasing deal of a state house, which led to the government annulling the deal (see Tien Phong, Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, VTC, etc. series of articles during October 2006).<sup>166</sup>

Another impressive case was so called “PMU”, which was considered by domestic and international media at the time a great success of Vietnamese news media. Just before the X Congress, there was a widespread and strong media coverage of PMU-18 (a Project Management Unit under Ministry of Transportation) that led to the resignation of the Transportation minister and the arrest of the vice minister, both of whom were running for membership in the Central Party Committee, and many other government officials and high-profile policemen.

However, media’s corruption fighting could be looked at from a slightly different perspective. As mentioned in the previous part, the media play a significant role in Vietnamese political life. Usually about half a year to nine months before the Congress, the media start to be fed with a lot of information by oppositors within the Party to fight each other. This is probably the most exciting time for the news media, lasting for about a year every five year, before being cramped again a while after the Congress.

The information fed to journalists is usually off-record, as it is impossible to access the information without the help of insiders, due to the access limits discussed in the section about censorship. Therefore, quite a few journalists get into trouble after the Congress, many times one or two years after the Congress, when “the losers” are believed to regain their power and revenge. In the case of National Bank governor mentioned above, two years after the widespread media coverage, a number of journalists who were involved in the coverage were questioned by the police (with questions such as who were the informants, etc.), resulting in a “silent period” for these economic reporters. This has been discussed a lot among Vietnamese journalists as one of many “professional accidents” resulted from “the guys’ revenge”.

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<sup>166</sup> The coverage also included a series of articles about similar purchases by many other officials of lower levels and led to a huge investigation into this issue by the government.

Similarly, in May 2008, journalists who wrote about corruption in PMU18 in early 2006 were questioned a lot by the police and two experienced reporters from the two biggest newspapers (“Tuoi Tre” and “Thanh Nien”) were arrested and jailed on the charge “taking advantage of official position while pursuing duty” meaning reporting false information on the case. Two months later, some deputy editors-in-chief and chief news editors of the two newspapers had their press cards withdrawn because they had edited and published the articles with false information as well as published articles strongly protesting the arrests. On the New Year Eve the two newspapers’ editors-in-chief received a decision to leave their office from... the next day.

No one knows for sure what information in the articles was false but journalists say that it is true there were a lot of mistakes by the reporters about the case because a lot of information was off-record and not provable. They also admit that in many similar cases the journalists are only mercenaries, willing or not willing, for fighting forces within the high-profile guys, because otherwise there is no chance of obtaining information about corruption of those high-levels.

This confirms McKinley (2009) who believes:

A number of constraints, ranging from poor access to information and legal protection to weak ethical and reporting standard, constrain journalists’ ability to offer balanced and accurate coverage of corruption in Vietnam and limit the degree to which the media can play the anti-corruption role it has been assigned.

More currently, since early and especially mid-2010, a year before the Congress in January 2011, there was a lot of coverage about corruption allegations against high-level state companies and some middle-level figures in the power system, who of course were all believed to have connections with higher powers. Many cases such as alleged corruption, bribes, misbehaviours in state leading corporations such as Bank of Investment and Development Vietnam (BIDV), Vinashin (a state shipping corporation), Electricity of Vietnam (EVN), Ministry of Health and some big pharmacist companies, etc. were widely covered and received a lot of attention from the public, which led to investigations and work position suspensions. However, we need to wait until a while after the Congress to

see how the media will be treated. Most likely there will not be much of change to the perceived scenario, which is: coverage of corruption by low or middle-level officials is welcome but that of misbehaviours by high profiles is not tolerated (also confirmed in McKinley 2009). In any case, after the retightening movements from the government/party authorities, the news media, generally speaking, have been much more carefully practising their role as corrupt fighters. This might send a bad signal about the nature of democratic environment in Vietnam. But, on the other hand, in my view, it could also be a good sign that journalists are more careful in what they report meaning improved journalistic professional skills and ethics.

One current sue case in the media industry itself in September 2010, against the general director of VTV at the time, who was also a member of the Party's Central Committee, though, despite being covered by some foreign media and widely verbally discussed among the media industry, was not covered by any domestic official news media. Some high media bosses told me they thought the case would be ignored, because the VTV director was retiring soon<sup>167</sup>.

In short, there have not been big changes in terms of political influence upon the news media. Its sine wave has been the case since Doi Moi in 1986, meaning political control loosened and tightened consecutively corresponding with the Party Congress. However, the media's power has reached the middle level, i.e. it is considered safe to report power abuse and/or corruption of low to middle levels (some editor believes it is ministerial level as cited in McKinley (2007) and confirmed by some of my interviewees who also, though, say it depends on other factors as well) in the country's power system. This, together with the media's own increased financial independence, the increased audience's autonomy, economic liberalisations, technological changes, and a much more overall relaxed social environment, promises more, not less, freedom for the news media in the coming years.

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<sup>167</sup> It is widely claimed that there is an unwritten law that the government and party's high figures should "land safely", meaning they are let retire without having their corrupt or irresponsible behaviours dug up because the current officials themselves want to "land safely" when they retire in the future.

### 3. Summary

To conclude, it is clear that the media in Vietnam have not changed much since the American War in terms of “sensitive” issues such as the government or party’s political strategies or ideologies (especially in terms of socialism or communism-orientation.) Those who pose any danger to the government or party are not tolerated, neither are individuals who promote pluralism.

However, over the time, the news media in Vietnam have moved from serving as simply a mouthpiece or propaganda tool of the government in the wartime to a means of providing the people with information, entertainment, and education. They have also been moving toward the status of relatively independent institutions to put a check on corruption in the government and economic organisations. However, this role of the media is still weak, thus, the media sometimes are seen as a means for the different oppositional forces within the government and party to fight against each other for their own, not the nation’s, interests.

Beside the political censorship/control, other factors affecting the news media can be summarised as follows:

- Economic liberalisation (state subsidy cuts) forces the news media to find other ways to support themselves;
- Although Vietnam has not committed anything about news media content while signing its WTO agreements, the post-WTO liberalisation of telecommunication and other commodity markets, e.g. printing papers, mobile phones, etc. has a great impact on the news media content production;
- Vietnam has signed international treaties and conventions, which makes it subject to international monitoring and pressure to enhance laws and legal practices such as human rights, freedom of expression and press, gender equality, etc. This might be a good basis for the media to be further liberalised.
- Technological developments such as internet with its applications, satellite and cable television, fixed and mobile phone, etc. have changed media audience behaviours, forcing the media to change accordingly.

- Technology also promotes increased and more frequent communication between people inside and outside Vietnam which makes it difficult for the government to keep the door-closing policy and makes it easier for citizens to raise their voice on alternative media;
- The wide distribution of international (in fact mainly American or British) cultural products, as well as greater chances of Vietnamese people travelling abroad have also increased information sharing and possibility to check the information provided by the party and government oriented media.

While these different factors are inter-influential, and it is difficult to identify causality, it does appear that economic and technological factors are probably the ultimate drivers of all the changes. Those news outlets that are more daring to push boundaries are also those that have greater economic independence.

The biggest change is the switch from originally money spenders to money makers. Except for the local party and government's print newspapers and websites, which still are subsidised but the trend is also a sharp subsidy cut, most news organisations are self-sufficient and quite many are making big profits.

The end of subsidies, or so called in Vietnamese way "the press being thrown out to the street"<sup>168</sup>, means some important things:

- The news media are "forced", or in many cases want, to be financially independent, meaning they have to compete to survive and make profits, which leads to the following:
- The government/party control over the content is automatically loosened (in Vietnamese case, the control is now limited to what the government and/or the party could confine the laws to) and the government ownership becomes only nominal;
- The media can, and are pursuing it, somewhat practise their role as a checker, as well as start influencing back the government/party.

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<sup>168</sup> The phrase "throw someone out to the street" means provide no shelter, protection or support. Vietnamese parents often threaten to throw their children to the street if they do not obey.



#### **4. Journalism Education and Training**

The Vietnam Journalists' Association (VJA) is officially the journalists' union and its activities include organising media conferences and training courses for its members. Most journalists are member and the membership fee is 10,000 VND (33 pence) per month. Each city/province has a provincial sub-association and each media outlet has a sub-sub-association.

Like other unions in Vietnam, the Association receives money from the government/party. The Association's chairman is a member of Central Party Committee and the editor-in-chief of Nhan Dan newspaper, which is the biggest party newspaper. One of his deputies is the deputy of Vietnam News Agency, one of the three media organisations belonging to the government. Another deputy is also a member of Central Party Committee and editor-in-chief of Communism Journal. So far, I have never heard of any case where the association raised its voice to protect individual journalists.

Only four institutions are permitted to provide undergraduate and postgraduate journalism education: Academy of Journalism and Communication under Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics and Publics Administration (Most if not all Vietnamese politicians have to obtain a political education at this Academy if they want to be promoted), Hanoi National University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City National University of Social Sciences and Humanities, and Hue University.

Every year about 300-400 journalism students graduate from these universities. However, most media houses prefer employing graduates from other fields such as economics, finance, foreign languages, international relations, etc. They claim that most journalism students have poor skills and knowledge and they blame the educational institutions for their theoretical and outdated approach. (AcademyofJournalismandCommunication 2008)

Some other institutions are allowed to provide short-term further education such as Vietnam Journalists' Association (VJA), Ministry of Information and Communication. The media organisations are only allowed to provide training for their own staffs. All training involving foreign trainers or trainees must be authorised by the Ministry and it is said that usually at least one participant is a

cultural policeperson but no one knows for sure if it is true and, if yes, who that person is. However, none of my interviewees say they have been in troubles for what he or she does in a training course, and usually the discussions in the courses are quite open regardless of the content.

In addition to these Vietnamese sources of journalist training, there many foreign-support training courses for Vietnamese journalists, both in Vietnam and abroad. These media development programmes “are small but significant steps towards a transformation of Vietnamese media.”<sup>169</sup>

Most of the foreign-aid media programmes are small scale and usually organised in cooperation between a Vietnamese organisation namely Ministry of Information and Communication, Vietnam Journalists Association and its local branches, Vietnam News Agencies, Vietnam Television, Voice of Vietnam, etc. and foreign/international organisations (usually non-profit) i.e. ABC Australia, World Association of Newspapers, International Journalists’ Programme, InWent – Capacity Building International, Reuters Foundation, etc.

Besides, there are also bilateral cooperation programmes in staff training for different media outlets between the outlets and foreign counterparts; or media support projects funded by international organisations such as UNICEF, UNFPA, FAO, Radda Barnen, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) etc. with specific themes of mutual interest: reporting on population and development, bird flu, HIV/AIDS, children, reproductive health, environment, etc. Again, all the programmes are of small scales and short terms.

The largest donor contributor to media development in Vietnam to date is the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), which began offering assistance in 1993 and continues to do so now. Five thousand journalists, almost a third of the total Vietnamese registered journalists, have been trained thanks to this project since the very first training started in 1997. Second to Sida is an ADB-funded project that is working with various news agencies to develop programmes aimed at reducing HIV/AIDS stigma throughout Vietnam. This programme does not include a specific capacity-building component. The French Government has

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<sup>169</sup> Borton 2004, cited in Davidsson, H. and Johansson, T (2005). Self-censorship in the Vietnamese Press – A conception study. BA thesis in Media and Communication. Hogskolan for Larande Och Kommunikation. Hogskolan I Jonkoping.

offered the second-largest capacity-building project after Sida's with a total of 700 journalists trained and has funded the creation of a mid-career training centre within the VJA as well as various media training courses. The British Council's MediaNet project is the third largest capacity-building project to date with 70 participants but lasts for 3 years for the same cohort.

Some areas are not yet open to foreign intervention. As mentioned earlier, the government has made it clear that "private ownership of media and independent media-sector unions and professional organisations will not be considered in the foreseeable future"(Dinh 2010). The general trend is the government/party officials are becoming more willing to discuss media legal and administrative reform although willingness is still limited and there remains a clear preference for skills development, business development and the institutionalisation of projects and programmes (Dinh 2010).

Therefore, according to my observation, until recently, most foreign-aid projects focused on short-course concentration skill training to journalists (modern news writing, lay-out, multimedia, investigative reporting, economic reporting, environment and health reporting, etc.). Some projects also offer technical support and managerial training. The only exception is Sida's Further Training for Journalists Project, which also engages in dialogues on issues such as the press law, ethical codes, the role of the media in society, as well as offers in-house training for individual media houses.

It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of any training process because it takes a long time for people to fully understand or see what they have actually learnt and what they have actually used or can use. However, as the support programmes have been going on for more than a decade, the trained journalists are now able to evaluate the training results. Quite a few independent research studies have been done (Vu and Pham 2008; AustralianAgencyforInternationalDevelopment 2009; Dinh 2010) (Elmqvist and Luwarso 2006; Elmqvist and Rylander 2010) which conclude that despite some shortcomings, the foreign-aid programmes have boosted the news media performance and their influence in the society and policy making. In details, they have:

- “Somewhat compensated for the poor journalism education at academic institutions.
- “changed the trained journalists’ way of thinking or approaching different issues of importance to Vietnam. Being equipped with knowledge of different issues of importance to Vietnam and the world, journalists have a more balanced worldview and become more responsible to their audience and society.
- “equipped the journalists with basic professional skills: finding news angles, being skeptical, critical thinking, writing balanced and carefully-checked news stories, reporting many voices, interviewing more grassroots, etc. which all underpin free press and free expressions and thus democracy. They have become more aware of the needs to be audience-oriented, and to present different voices including grassroots.
- “Provided opportunities for journalists to share their experience and help each other with their profession. This is even of more significance in Vietnam where networking is vital for journalists and their media agencies especially when reporting power abuses among the highest government officials – pushing the boundaries.
- “To some extent helped the trainees influence their colleagues and employers, many of whom either learn from the participants or accept their new way of reporting and writing news stories. Especially, those who are in management positions have shown great impacts on their media organizations.” (Vu and Pham 2008: 82-83)

Elmqvist and Rylander (2010) confirm the positive result of the management training, saying that the media “management capacity has improved considerably” (p.3) and that the results “are some of the most important for the continued development of the Vietnamese media sector” (p.3) . Elmqvist and Rylander also find that the interaction between the media and their audience is improved and

“many media organisations now cover issues of importance for their particular target group and inform about opportunities following

policy decisions as well as bring to the forefront opinions and complaints by the readers.” (p.3)

While acknowledging the ups and downs in Vietnamese government’s approach towards the news media, Elmqvist and Rylander still believe:

“The (Sida) Journalist project has provided awareness, knowledge and skills to participating media, in particular in the area of ethics, and the media is exercising its capacities within the current Vietnamese media framework.

The work on ethics has included all the major media houses in Vietnam, both an individual level with a discussion on company code of ethics, and a code of ethics for the entire media business in Vietnam through the cooperation with VJA. This work is of utmost importance, as lack of ethics has been the major pre-text for the government to impose a stricter state control of the media content.

During the project period a bottom-up process has been ongoing within the Vietnamese media and through their audiences. Despite the last year’s backlashes, there have been positive transformations also coming from above, from the ruling structures in terms of increased openness for the media. The dynamics of this process will be maintained through the media, and the public exercising its rights. In this context the project has been relevant and well timed, providing avenues for capacity building, policy dialogue and exchange otherwise not available for Vietnamese media.” (p.4)

In case of in-house training, which at the start in 1998 met with a lot of skepticism from both the media and the government, it is understood that this kind of training is the most useful way of influencing the hierarchies and old-fashion ways of working within the media because it has been:

- “Raising the professional spirit of the organisation, a common understanding and unity among the staff;

- Strengthening relationship, improved dialogue and interactive communication between managers and journalists, better coordination between journalists with other colleagues within the organisation;
- Enhancing quality of journalism in content (story telling) and photograph;
- Interaction with readers/viewers/audience: viewers get more access to the media;
- Boosting journalists' ethics
- General professional journalistic skills” (Dinh 2010: 8)

One content of the concentration skills training and a core focus of the in-house training is cooperation between different people in newsrooms, which brings the results as presented above by the researchers. A concept called Maestro invented by associate professor Buck Ryan from University of Kentucky was introduced to Vietnamese newsrooms through the SIDA project. It aims to increase the newsroom efficiency and improve content quality. It has been employed and appreciated by more and more newsrooms in Vietnam, and as a proposed solution to a range of problems in Vietnamese newsrooms, it is highly relevant to research question 2. This concept and its use in Vietnam will be discussed in details in the next chapters.

*Note:* For technical reason, the references in Appendix 1 are merged with the thesis' main reference list, which is found in pages 278-295.